

Jogja's Community Theater for Radical Change for the Difabled

Irfan Kortschak

Theatre is the art of looking at ourselves
– AUGUSTO BOAL, Founder of the Theatre of the Oppressed

A GROUP OF PEOPLE with disabilities and with little or no previous acting experience came together to develop the skills required to perform a play to express their hopes, aspirations and frustrations. They are known as 'difabled' or differently abled people.

The Performance

The performance took place on a makeshift open-air stage using only the simplest of props, in the *pendhopo*, a large pavilion-like structure, attached to the sub-district office in Berbah, Sleman, on the outskirts of the city of Jogja (Yogyakarta). The performers were mostly amateurs with limited experience. They came together a week before to develop the concept for the play, to create a scenario, and to practice the skills required to convey their story. They were an extremely diverse group, including teachers, traders, activists, housewives and unemployed dependents, with widely varying backgrounds, characters, needs and aspirations. Prior to preparing for the performance, the single common denominator between them was that all of them had previously acted as informants for a work of participatory research conducted by Ekawati Liu, a PhD candidate from Deakin University in Australia, into the livelihood choices of Indonesian villagers with disabilities.

Together, the group presented a performance consisting of two acts, with the first involving villagers with hearing impairments describing the difficulties they had in accessing effective hearing aids and other assistive equipment, and telling the audience how this affected their ability to participate in the life of their communities. Despite the participants' lack of experience with theater, they performed with passion and conviction.

They were telling their own stories, based on their own experiences. During the preparations for the performance, Ratna had been having issues



Dian and two other performers, performing on the stage.

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The chorus claps and sings to accompany the performance.

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with a home-made wheel chair her father had built for her, a modified plastic chair with wheels. While social welfare agencies do sometimes provide support so that people with disabilities can obtain proper wheel chairs, this support is inconsistent and not everyone who needs one is provided with one. Like many other assistive devices, they are prohibitively expensive in Indonesia, subject to taxes and excessive markups by distributors. During the preparations, Triyanto, a hearing impaired participant, had trouble following the discussion. One of the sign language interpreters had been late in arriving, so he was trying to lip read. He was angry that he had never been able to access a hearing aid that met his needs.

The second act portrayed the story of a young man raising chickens who needed a loan to expand his business. When the financial institution's field officers visited to inspect his business, they learned that he was blind. Without ever referring to his disability, the field officers found various barely plausible excuses to refuse the loan. The story of the young man whose loan was refused had no clear conclusion, and it was not clear how the issue of the lack of access to hearing aids and other assistive devices was to be resolved.

In effect, the discussion that followed the performance was its third act. At this point, the performance expanded to encompass the audience, which was required to participate in determining how the story would unfold, not on the stage – but in real life, in their real lives. Many in the audience had their own experiences with lack of access to the facilities they needed to participate fully in community life, and this was a chance for them to express their own frustrations and hopes. It took effort and energy for many of them to do so, with many of the audience having conditions or issues that made communication challenging. Interpreters conversant in sign language were available to ensure that those of the audience who used this language to communicate were able to participate in the forum. But everyone made the effort, and those expressing their opinions were confident that at this forum, when they spoke, they would be listened to.

Disability in Indonesia: An Evolving Paradigm

Indonesia has a long history of social welfare programs for people with disabilities, with these programs based to a large extent on community attitudes that recognize social obligations to protect and provide for the weak and the poor, often through religious and community institutions. These

programs have been based on a paradigm that regards disability in terms of medical conditions or impediments that restrict a person's activities and prevents him or her from participating in the social and economic life of the community. According to this paradigm, the state and the community have a duty to care for those who, for no fault of their own, are unable to look after themselves and therefore need to be helped. Thus, government agencies, religious institutions and community organizations have regarded "handicapped people" as the "deserving poor," worthy objects of charity, to be placed first in line to receive handouts of rice, cash, clothes and other benefits.

In recent years, disability activists and development actors have challenged this paradigm, advocating for an approach that recognizes a bio-psycho-social model of disability that "conceives of disability as arising from the interaction between a person's functional limitations and the environment."¹ According to this model, people with functional limitations are only disabled to the extent that they are unable to participate fully in the community due to the physical and social environment in which they operate. This model implies that disability can be addressed by making physical environments more accessible to a wider range of people of varying abilities. Also, it implies that people who need them should have ready access to assistive devices, including hearing aids, modified transportation, wheel chairs, and prosthetics, and to services and applications that enable them to use communication and information technologies. Finally, the new model recognizes that disability is shaped by social attitudes. People have to believe that people with varying abilities can make valuable contributions, including the people with disabilities themselves. Thus, it is vital to encourage social attitudes that work to ensure inclusion. In general, then, rather than on providing for needs, the focus of the new paradigm is on enabling *participation* and ensuring *access*.

As a result of this advocacy and activism, Indonesian policy makers' ideas have begun to be shaped by this new paradigm, as reflected by changes to policy and legal instruments related to people with disability. In 2006, the Indonesian government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities, which is clearly informed by the participation paradigm, defining people with disabilities as "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." [added emphasis] Reflecting similar principles, in 2016, the Indonesian government enacted Law No. 8 on People with Disabilities, which explicitly adopts a human-rights based model that recognizes the rights of people with disabilities to participate as full members of the community, including through participation in employment. The law and related documents state that this is to be achieved through the creation of an enabling legal and policy environment; the promotion of skills development opportunities; and measures to eliminate discrimination.²

Lack of Understanding of Disability Undermines Good Intentions

Of course, it's one thing for the government to ratify a convention and to promulgate a new law, and quite another to ensure that people with disabilities are really able to participate. Not only do official statistics paint a fairly bleak picture regarding the situation of people with disability in Indonesia in terms of economic status and of participation in education and employment,³ but these statistics systematically underestimate their number and fail to capture the real impact of disability on people's lives.⁴ This is largely because of a general lack of understanding about what disability is, with this lack based on entrenched, unexamined beliefs regarding what people with varying abilities should be able to do and what roles they should play.

It is relatively easy to recognize that people of working age who are completely blind or totally dependent on wheel chairs for mobility are disabled. These people are the ones captured by the official statistics. However, many other people who experience significant barriers to participation just are not recognized as having a disability. Their inability to participate is regarded as an unfortunate fact of life, to be accepted without thought. Community members and government agents just don't think of people such as older people with a disability who cannot leave their homes; autistic children who do not attend school or who perform badly there; or people who are significantly hearing impaired without being totally deaf as having a disability.

During my work for community development programs, I have often visited villages and talked with village leaders who simply tell me that there are no disabled people in their community. Invariably, if you ask the right questions, you will find that there are many people who cannot or do not work, who never leave their homes, who are regarded as anti-social or insane or possessed by demons – but they are not considered to be disabled.

It's a matter of definition, of recognition, of understanding what disability means.

Community-driven Development: Lack of Mechanisms to Listen to People with Disabilities

Not only do people in local communities, including officials, not really have a clear idea of what constitutes disability or how many people with disability there are, their mechanisms for listening to them to understand what they want and need are often limited, ineffective, or non-existent. Over the past few decades, following the end of an intensely authoritarian, paternalistic regime in 1998, Indonesian society has been involved in a massive decentralization initiative. This initiative has worked to ensure very high levels of community participation, with the emergence of a wide range of small, devolved village-level institutions that are meant to enable all citizens to voice their aspirations and to have a say in how public funds and community resources are used.

In particular, until 2014, an umbrella program known as the National Community Empowerment Program (*Program Nasional Pemberdayaan Masyarakat*, PNPM) provided block grants to communities to enable them to establish participatory councils to determine their own priorities and plans, with funds to build good, cost-efficient, fit-for-purpose, village infrastructure, including roads, health centers, water facilities, and so on. Following the conclusion of the PNPM program, in 2014, Indonesia's parliament enacted the Village Law, which was intended to build upon the principles and structures of PNPM to allocate up to 10 percent of the national budget for disbursement to village-level institutions to provide public services and community infrastructure that met the needs of all members of the community.

Peduli: Need for a Program to Include the Excluded

While these initiatives have often been very successful in general terms, providing public infrastructure and services that do benefit almost all members of the community, making sure that the infrastructure and services not only benefit members of marginalized groups, including people with disabilities, but that these people actually play a role in determining that the

resources are used to meet their needs, has been a persistent challenge. To be fair, quite a few high-level policy makers and program implementers have been aware of this failure and have tried to address it – but often with limited success. Many community development programs pushed and required village facilitators to ensure that women and poor people at least attended meetings. Even so, their attendance was often *pro forma*, with their influence over decision-making often limited, despite constant monitoring and tweaking of the program to overcome this issue. Ensuring the participation of people with disabilities, who often had difficulty leaving their homes, difficulty communicating, and limited self-confidence, was even more challenging, particularly when neither the community nor even the people themselves were ever really convinced that they needed to be involved or that they needed special consideration. Often, community groups just had no idea that it was possible to change the way infrastructure was built or meetings conducted or services provided, because they had no idea what people with different abilities needed.

At the same time, many people with social, physical and other disabilities were working together in groups to solve their own problems. They often do so with little help from government programs. People with leprosy-related disabilities, women-headed households, people with HIV, and many others were working together to ensure that they could establish businesses, access health care, borrow money, learn to read and write, on their own initiative and using their own resources. Of course, in every region, there was always a handful of officials who were unusually committed to ensuring inclusion, and they often did what they could to support these initiatives. And there were also a number of high-level officials who were also unusually committed to the achievement of inclusion and social justice who felt that it was their duty to ensure that the state provided a fair share of resources to support these initiatives and to encourage their replication elsewhere. Village-level facilitators, community activists, non-governmental organization (NGO) workers, journalists, and many others were also becoming increasingly loud and insistent in their demands that these sorts of resources should be made available. Something of a social movement began to emerge, leading to a commitment on the part of a number of high-level officials who had been involved in designing and implementing the community empowerment program to trying to develop a new program specifically to include the excluded by encouraging excellent local initiatives, providing resources

so they could do their job better, and pushing other communities to learn from them.

Peduli and SIGAB

While the PNPM program had started out as small, highly-idealistic pilot study that was widely expected to fail dismally, over the decades, it had proven to be an extremely effective way of building high-quality infrastructure at relatively low cost, infrastructure that was usually not only cheaper, but that better met people's needs – because they had been directly involved in planning, designing and building it. The government had recognized that this program was an effective means for it to meet a wide range of development goals by scaling up and expanding the project across the nation. With the recognized success of the program, those involved in designing and implementing it had accumulated a fair amount of political capital, which enabled them to advocate and push for the allocation of public resources for a new approach and a new program to benefit people that had until then not really been involved in the discourse.

At the instigation of this coalition, in a radical and somewhat controversial initiative, in 2011, the Indonesian government established Peduli, initially under the PNPM umbrella, with the specific intention of including groups and individuals who had been excluded from the development process. The program was intended to provide resources and to give a voice not only to people with disabilities, but to members of stigmatized ethnic minorities, sex workers, transsexuals, former political prisoners, and drug users, among many other groups that had often been excluded, often because other people in their community did not even recognize them as full members of the community, let alone recognizing their right to participate in determining the use of community resources. This program worked by providing resources to civil society organizations involved in poverty reduction, social justice and inclusion, with specific experience with these groups, including disabled people's organizations, preferably those established and managed by disabled people themselves.

The focus of all these civil society organizations varied from region to region and between the groups of people they served, but they all tended to work to build their members' confidence and belief in themselves, as well as building their capacities to earn a living and to otherwise par-

ticipate meaningfully in their community. The program has had significant success in some areas and with some groups, often seriously challenging paradigms that have prevailed for decades. One startling example of this was a small livelihoods program conducted in a few villages and intended to benefit former political prisoners, mostly former members of the suppressed Indonesian Communist Party, (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*), most of whom are now elderly, infirm and desperately poor. For decades, it has been taboo to even mention the existence of these people except in terms of fear and loathing. No government program prior to Peduli had ever been implemented to benefit them specifically, as a group, in any way. In fact, they were more likely to be specifically excluded, with access to health care, the right to move freely, and even the right of their children to attend school often restricted or curtailed. It was even illegal for them to meet in groups, so when this particular initiative first started, police and local officials often visited, unable to believe that their meeting together was conducted under the auspices of a government program.

SIGAB: A Difabled People's Organization Establishes Model Villages around Jogja

However, even compared to the challenges related to taboo and stigmatized groups the challenge involving disabled people's organizations has been harder than was envisaged. In whole regions of Indonesia, autonomous organizations managed by people with disabilities to advocate for their own rights have never existed, and those that do are often poorly developed, particularly outside the large urban areas, with limited capacities, resources and experience. Of course, there were also exceptions, outstanding, inspirational individuals and organizations that could be held up as an example to be emulated. One organization that has been involved in innovative and exciting initiatives is SIGAB (*Sasana Integrasi dan Advokasi Difabel*, the Institute for Integration and Advocacy of the Difabled), an independent non-governmental organization established in Jogjakarta on 5 May 2003, to defend and fight for the rights of the "difabled" (differently abled) throughout Indonesia and to ensure their full inclusion.

Following the promulgation of the Village Law, which requires the central government to provide funds to the villages for their development initiatives, SIGAB sought to develop eight "good practice" model villages in the

region around Jogja from which other villages could learn. The idea was to actively include people with disabilities in village-level processes to develop a full range of services and resources that were accessible to everyone, including people with disabilities. Specifically, this involved ensuring access to communication facilities and resources such as livelihoods and savings and loan programs, with measures to establish networks between people with disabilities and other marginalized groups. To develop these facilities and resources, SIGAB worked with a coalition of grassroots disability organizations, villagers and community leaders to map the conditions of people with disabilities and the service gaps that affected them. This mapping process was vital to ensure that everyone involved, including the disabled people themselves, had a better understanding of what disability was, how many people experienced it, who they were, and what they needed.

Ekawati Liu (Eka), a feisty activist with a long involvement in disability issues in Indonesia, took advantage of this initiative to conduct her research to gain a better understanding of how people with disability participate in economic activities at the village level.⁵ She wanted to gain a better understanding of how people in villages earned a living or found means of meeting their needs, what options were open to them and which options were not, and what strategies they used to negotiate for access to resources and services at the village level. Most importantly, she wanted to know what they wanted. Too often, government and community initiatives for people with disability have failed simply because nobody had any idea what the intended beneficiaries wanted or needed. For decades, government agencies have thought in terms of cookie-cutter solutions to the problems that they imagined existed for people they did not understand. For example, across Indonesia, social welfare agencies have been obsessed with programs to teach massage skills to the blind and sewing skills to sex workers. Very often, these programs do not work, simply because the people they were intended to benefit did not want what was being provided. So, Eka thought it was important to ask, to find out what the people actually thought they needed. Even just the act of asking was a radical act.

Developing a Theater Performance

The theatrical performance described in the opening paragraphs of this article was an integral part of Eka's research process. Eka and the activists at

SIGAB were committed to the idea that people with disabilities should participate fully in the research process, not just as informants, but in its conceptualization and formulation. One means to achieve this was by inviting a group of villagers with wide-ranging and diverse disabilities to come together to identify the issues that affected them and the solutions to these issues, and to produce a theatrical performance on the basis of that discussion.

To stage the production, Eka worked with SIGAB to conduct a five-day workshop. The workshop was facilitated by Joned Suryatmoko, a theater maker, playwright, community facilitator and researcher, whose role was to manage the logistics of the process and to establish a framework by which the participants could explore and express their experiences, while at the same time intervening in or guiding the actual content of the performance and the associated preparatory processes to the very least extent possible. Clearly influenced by the ideas of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal, who established the "Theatre of the Oppressed," a theatrical form originally used in radical popular education movements, Joned believes that all members of the community, including those with no formal training or experience as artists, have the agency to transform their own knowledge into aesthetic practices and arts making – and that by doing so, the performers have the power to transform both those who perform and the audience with whom they interact. Reflecting Boal, Joned believes that theater is "... a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it."

Becoming Aware of Shared Interests and Concerns

In order for the individuals participating in the workshop to be able to produce a story that reflected their aspirations and concerns as a group, they first had to become *aware* of their shared interests and common concerns. This was by no means an automatic process, as each member of the group had developed their own means for dealing with their own life, and did not necessarily see what they had in common with the others. For example, while the fiercely independent seventy-year old Mbah Muji had previously participated in village-level disabled people's groups, he barely seemed to accept that the label "disabled" applied to him. Sure, he was completely blind, but he was an active professional musician, he was able to climb trees to harvest coconuts, and he had worked as a masseur. Not only did he meet

his own needs, he supported an elderly mother and often made material contributions to his adult children. Through his work as a musician, he was actively involved in, and valued by, the broader community. It might not have been easy for him to see what he had in common with Ibu Karyati, who had previously been hospitalized and medicated for schizophrenia and who had periods where she felt unable to interact with others or look after herself, and was dependent on siblings who provided for her. The degree to which members of the group felt constrained by functional limitations varied considerably. It became clear that no two people with disabilities experience their disability in the same way as another, and that their individual needs are highly variable.

Thus, for the group to perform a story that was *their* story, each performer had first to reflect on her or his own personal story and to become aware of how this story intersected with those of the others in the group. To facilitate this, participants were invited to engage in a brainstorming session. This involved gathering together in small groups with a range of photos and visual prompts, with the pictures and images described in detail to those who were visually impaired. The participants were invited to use these prompts to define their current economic and social circumstances, the circumstances to which they aspired, and the obstacles they faced in achieving these aspirations.

Developing a Story

Each member of the group interpreted this task in their own way. The irascible Mbah Muji at first stubbornly insisted that he did not have any problems (*Mboten wonten masalah!*). Others focused on their aspirations, with one hearing impaired man stating simply “I want to work (*Aku ingin punya pekerjaan*). Others focused on their own attitudes, their lack of belief in themselves, while Mbak Dian, an extroverted activist whose mobility had been affected by polio, stated that the problem was that other people did not trust in her ability to be a useful member of the community (*Kurangnya kepercayaan*). Others focused on the practical equipment and facilities they needed, particularly assistive devices such as hearing aids and wheel chairs. Each participant wrote down a simple phrase, short sentence, or single word on a piece of paper to summarize the aspiration or constraint they had identified. In small groups, the participants discussed and explained their reasons for



The group during a rehearsal.

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their choices. Shifts began to occur and the participants began to see how the ideas of other participants related to them. For example, after hearing others talk about their need for assistive devices, Mbah Muji began to talk

about how a government agency had previously provided him with a reach pole for the visually impaired, but that it had been poorly designed, so he left it behind. When he was asked if that meant he could not go out, he laughed out loud and described going out to gather grass for his goats without any assistive device at all, saying that he knew every inch of a wide area around his house and could navigate it confidently.

Following the discussion, with the collage of printed statements expressing the wide range of ideas, hopes, and expressions of frustration, the participants were invited to try to determine the relationship between their different statements, to identify cause and effect between them, to formulate a “problem tree.” For example, most of the participants saw that “lack of access to assistive devices” contributed to “lack of self-confidence,”



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A hearing-impaired participant addressing the group in sign language.

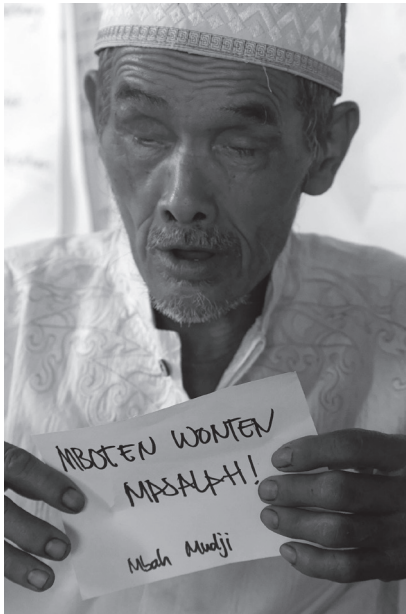
which in turn led to failure to apply for work. This linked to other people’s lack of trust in the ability of people affected by disability, which also contributed to the participants failing to apply for work or to develop businesses, being convinced that their initiatives would be rejected or denied support. The process of drawing up these problem trees involved intense and lively discussion by which the participants became aware of how their own perceptions of their individual circumstances were related to those of the others in the group.

Once the relationship between each participant’s individual story and ideas with those of the others in the group became clear through the process of establishing problem trees, the next step was to create a story that expressed the relationship between these ideas. To enable the participants to create a dramatic story, the facilitators provided them with an example of a story, the story of Si Nia, a blind woman who, despite her desire for independence and autonomy,



The group prepared a problem tree.

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Mbah Muji, holding a sign saying “I don’t have any problems!”



Dian, holding a sign saying “Lack of trust.”

was constrained by overprotective parents, who objected to her relationship with a man called Anggoro, also visually impaired. By discussing the themes in this story, the participants were able to see how the themes that they had raised when drawing up the problem trees could also be dramatized.

Belief that People with Disabilities Cannot Work

A major theme that had emerged from the process of creating the problem tree and the surrounding discussion was that the biggest challenges the participants faced related to the beliefs of the people in their community that disabled people were unable to work or to be productive, even though work and productive opportunities were exactly what the members of the group needed to address their exclusion from the community. The group collectively formulated a single short sentence that summarized their frustration: “It’s because we are disabled that we need work!” (*Justru karena aku difabel, aku harus bekerja!*). To express this idea dramatically, the group conceived of the story of the young man raising chickens, whose inability to expand his

business had nothing to do with the fact that he was blind, and everything to do with the fact that the financial institution's field officers assumed that he would not be able to make a success of his business *because* he was blind.

Interestingly, when I asked the participants if any of them had ever applied for credit themselves and had their applications rejected, they all shook their heads. They all described struggling to establish their own businesses with the limited resources that were available to them, sometimes using soft loans or small gifts of money or other resources provided by family members or members of the surrounding community, sometimes just building on the fruits of their own labor. Not a single one had ever applied for a loan from a formal institution. Dian, the bubbly and extroverted village activist, who certainly did not seem to lack self-confidence, said: "I think most difabled people just think there is no point applying, so we work out other ways of doing things." The story the group presented was not so much about what *had* happened to anyone in the group, but what they *feared* or *believed* would happen.

So I asked Dian if she thought that maybe she or other members of the group might be more confident about applying for a loan after taking part in the workshop, if it had given them the courage they needed to face their fears. She smiled and shook her head doubtfully: "It's not just about our attitudes. Our attitudes can only change if other people's attitudes change too." And so I asked if she thought performing the group's play could help change the attitudes of the broader community. And now she laughed outright at the naivete of my question:

I hope so. But it's just a small step. It's part of an ongoing process. It won't change anything unless we keep on pushing to make things change.

Endnotes

- 1 See Sri Moertiningsih Adioetomo, Daniel Mont and Irwanto, *Persons With Disabilities in Indonesia - Empirical Facts and Implications for Social Protection Policies*, Fakultas Ekonomi Universitas Indonesia, September 2014, [www.tnp2k.go.id/images/uploads/downloads/Disabilities%20report%20Final%20sept2014%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.tnp2k.go.id/images/uploads/downloads/Disabilities%20report%20Final%20sept2014%20(1).pdf)

2 See International Labor Organization, “What’s next after Indonesia’s new disability law: disability management in the workplace,” www.ilo.org/jakarta/info/public/pr/WCMS_475052/lang--en/index.htm.

3 For example, the data show that less than half (46.21 percent) of disabled people from the age of 7 to 24 attended school. Up to 65 percent of people without disabilities within that same age group attended. Many disabled people cannot find jobs. The data recorded that only 24 percent of people with disabilities aged between 18 and 64 were recruited in 2015. The recruitment rate for people without disabilities within the same age group was 42.8 percent. (See *Profil Penduduk Indonesia Hasil Supas 2015*, Bappenas, at <https://www.bps.go.id/publication/2016/11/30/63daa471092bb2cb7c1fada6/profil-penduduk-indonesia-hasil-supas-2015.html>)

4 According to official statistics, only 1.4 percent of Indonesians have disabilities. This is barely plausible, considering that the World Health Organization estimates the international average to be around 15 per cent of the global population, or one billion people. By contrast, in Thailand, the government estimates that 2.9 percent of the population has a disability, while in Vietnam the figure is 7.8 percent (See “Disability data and the development agenda in Indonesia” *Inside Indonesia*, Edition 119: Jan-Mar 2015 at <https://www.insideindonesia.org/disability-data-and-the-development-agenda-in-indonesia-2>.)

5 Ekawati Liu’s research and the SIGAB theater workshop were funded by Indonesia’s Peduli program, through the Asia Foundation.