

# Nay Lin Soe

*Founder and Program Director*

*Myanmar Independent Living Initiative (MILI)*

## **Impact on the field of democracy:**

- Myanmar's election in November 2015 was a significant milestone in the country's history, lifting the hopes of its people for a peaceful transition into a full democracy. As a result of the leadership of Mr. Nay Lin Soe and the staff at MILI, it was also Myanmar's most inclusive and accessible election ever for men and women with disabilities.
- To make inclusion of persons with disability in the elections a reality, Mr. Soe and MILI:
  - Developed an innovative and inclusive voter education campaign encouraging persons with disabilities to vote, including **mobile voter education concerts** performed by musicians with disabilities, **inclusive posters** representing persons with disabilities, a **radio program**, and **brochures** explaining instructions for voting.
  - Participated in coordination **meetings with the Union Election Commission (UEC) Training Working Group** to ensure the 2015 Elections Polling Staff Manual provided information for easy access to polling stations for voters with disabilities.
  - Supported poll workers at the UEC through an **educational video** called "A Precious Ballot", a **new chapter in the poll worker manual** about voters with disabilities, a **polling stations booklet** describing how to set up polling stations to maximize access, and **disability rights trainings** for 220 election officials.
  - Increased access to the ballot by facilitating the creation of a **tactile ballot guide** for voters who are blind or have low vision.
  - Advocated with the UEC for a **pilot of 15 fully accessible polling stations** in Myanmar.
  - Engaged Myanmar political parties by **organizing two forums for candidates**, one in Yangon and one in Mandalay, with candidates to educate them about the challenges facing persons with disabilities. MILI has encouraged parties to not only advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities and make inclusive policies part of their platforms, but to nominate candidates with disabilities.

## **Focus on the next generation of leaders:**

- Mr. Soe established MILI in 2011 as a cross-disability organization (supporting people with many different types of disabilities). At its inception, MILI had no budget and no resources, with a single office in Yangon. Four years later, through Mr. Soe's dedication, MILI now has 45 full-time staff and nine part-time staff spread across 21 offices in the country, preparing the next generation of disability rights leaders in Myanmar.
- MILI's work emphasizes outreach to disability rights organizations and activists across Myanmar. Mr. Soe has proactively included young men and women with disabilities from MILI and other disabled persons' organizations (DPOs) in advocacy trainings, held forums for persons with disabilities, and conducted workshops for other DPOs on disability-inclusive elections.

- Since there are very limited resources in local languages for persons with disabilities, MILI publishes a magazine in the Myanmar language, which includes information on political and electoral participation.
- In 2013, MILI organized Myanmar's first national art festival for persons with disabilities and continues to do so annually. MILI uses this forum as a tool to educate the public about the rights of persons with disabilities. It offers opportunities for MILI staff and other disability rights leaders to hone their skills on leadership and teaching others about disability rights.

#### **Sustained dedication:**

- Mr. Soe has been a disability rights champion for more than 12 years. Recognizing that many disability rights organizations in Myanmar focused on a single disability type, he set out to establish one of the first cross-disability organizations in 2011, leading to the creation of MILI.
- Under Mr. Soe's leadership, MILI became the first Myanmar DPO engaged in disability rights work in the political and electoral process. MILI has been working for equal access to political life since 2012.
- MILI has supported the UEC, political party members and voters with disabilities through two significant, historical elections and continues to set its sights on future collaboration and work with the UEC to improve electoral access.

#### **Social progress:**

- As a direct result of Mr. Soe's advocacy and MILI's educational efforts, members of the UEC, political party candidates, the general public and other election stakeholders have become more aware of the rights of persons with disabilities.
- As the UEC created its Strategic Plan for 2014-2018, it included disability accessibility as a core component of its future work for the first time.

#### **Inspirational leadership:**

- Mr. Soe's work has not only affected those served by MILI or working as MILI staff, but also in encouraging other DPOs and their members to join a movement to support access to elections and political processes. For workshops, trainings and forums Mr. Soe has taken great care to include representatives from other DPOs, even if they are not part of MILI.
- As a result, several Myanmar DPOs who otherwise would have never been involved in elections and political processes are now active in the space and encouraging more inclusion of persons with disabilities as candidates, voters, poll workers and observers.
- MILI's work has also served as a best practice regionally with lessons learned shared via the ASEAN General Election Network for Disability Access (AGENDA).

**Alignment with IFES' mission:**

- Mr. Soe works in Myanmar, a country in which IFES has operated since 2012. MILI has been a steadfast IFES partner and self-starter in promoting access to elections for all citizens, with or without disabilities.
- IFES has strived to support citizens' rights to participate in elections in Myanmar. MILI has been instrumental in ensuring that an underrepresented population – another IFES priority – is part of the citizenry that IFES supports.

**Diversity and inclusion:**

- Mr. Soe, who himself has a disability, is a proactive leader and champion for the political and electoral rights of men and women with disabilities, an underserved and underrepresented population in Myanmar.
- Moreover, Mr. Soe is careful to address the rights of persons with different types of disabilities through his work, including persons with intellectual disabilities. As Mr. Soe noted in a recent interview, “The biggest challenge in Myanmar is that persons with intellectual disabilities are still unable to vote. We are working with the Union Election Commission to change this.”