

Asia & Pacific Disability Forum – Third General Assembly & Conference
February 27-29 2008 Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Section 8: MAKING AN IMPACT ON NEEDLESS DISABILITY
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It is a great pleasure and privilege to be here and to have been invited to participate in this important conference, which, by recognising IMPACT's work marks an important milestone in our fight against the causes of avoidable disability. Thank you so much for this opportunity.

“For the first time in history, mankind has the knowledge and technology to defeat many causes of disability which have threatened mankind since time began. The question we ask is why, when so much is preventable or could be alleviated, are the lives, hopes and opportunities of some 600 million people affected by disability? I am convinced that at least half this disability could be prevented or could now be reversed at low cost.”

Sir John Wilson, CBE, DCL, Founder of the IMPACT Programme, Sight Savers International and the International Agency for Prevention of Blindness, who was himself blind.

It is estimated that 1 in 10 of the world's people are disabled. 80% live in developing countries, one third of them are children. Knowledge about ways to prevent avoidable disability is a basic human right, one that is often ignored.

Remarkable progress has been made in the past 50 years. For example, 10 million people were cured of leprosy and millions more had sight restored through cataract surgery. River blindness, polio and other diseases are coming under control. The World Bank estimates that 3 million child deaths are prevented and many more children escape the disabling consequences of disease as the result of immunisation.

IMPACT's vision is that no one should become or remain needlessly disabled through disease, lack of knowledge or shortage of services. We are working towards the creation of a non-handicapping environment for all. Sir John founded IMPACT to take action today to prevent disability tomorrow and left us a challenging agenda.

- **Early Identification and Treatment**

Effective action when symptoms first appear can prevent a lifetime of disability. IMPACT's screening programmes in the community and schools, mobile clinics, the training of teachers and school health monitors, together with health education, are all making a real difference.

Vision 2020 estimates that 161 million of the world's people are visually impaired, 124 million have low vision and 37 million are blind. Yet, with today's knowledge, 80% of the causes are avoidable – 60% treatable and 20% preventable. 90% of the world's blind people live in developing countries. At least 9 million of those live in India and 7 million in Africa.

Latest WHO estimates show that 278 million people world-wide live with disabling hearing impairment – that's 4.2% of the world's population. Yet again, half this deafness and hearing impairment is avoidable, and two-thirds of people who could benefit from a hearing aid live in developing countries, where ear care services are just not yet available to the majority. The annual requirement for hearing aids is estimated to be 7 million, whilst annual fitting in developing countries is less than 1 million. Affordable hearing aids, using rechargeable batteries, are breaking through the sound barrier for many people who did not even know of their existence. Assistive device centres are also providing low-cost mobility aids.

- **Affordable, Accessible Surgery**

At least 1.3 billion people world-wide lack access to the most basic healthcare, often because they cannot afford it. As a result, so many become ill, die or are disabled from preventable or curable conditions. Timely treatment can restore sight, sound or movement to millions of people.

For example, cataract is the world's leading cause of visual impairment and blindness, yet surgery can restore sight. Over 2 million cataract operations are now performed annually on the Indian sub-continent alone.

Research in India and the United States has shown that sight-restoring surgery extends a person's life and economic status. There is every reason to assume that similar gains must be made through ear, orthopaedic, plastic and other surgical interventions.

IMPACT's Lifeline Express hospital train, Jibon Tari floating hospital and mobile surgical teams are good examples of the innovative way in which we take the hospital to the people, but this is not just a healthcare model, we try to open people's minds to the knowledge about prevention, which is their fundamental right.

- **Safer Motherhood and Child Survival**

WHO estimates that 500,000 healthy young women do not survive pregnancy and childbirth each year and approximately 15 million develop long-term disabilities.

This is a tragedy at the heart of family life.

Yet many of the causes can be avoided by delaying the age of first pregnancy, by stopping harmful practices and through timely access to skilled care. 99% of maternal deaths occur in countries of Asia and Africa and are 100 times higher in sub-Saharan Africa than in high income countries, proving that this could be prevented - if only resources and services such as improved training, effective pre and post natal care and better nutrition were available.

Prevention depends on social change and the empowerment of women with knowledge to make informed choices and protect themselves and their families, as much as on medical intervention.

Nearly 11 million children die before their fifth birthday each year. Clearly this is linked to the same shortfall in maternal health care, disease, malnutrition, poverty and lack of knowledge. Malnourished mothers are more likely to give birth to at-risk low weight babies. This affects 20% of all births in developing countries, seriously disadvantaging the child from the start of its life.

It is fitting that this debate is taking place in Bangladesh, where measures that IMPACT is taking, such as training 3,707 traditional birth attendants, empowering 37,000 women and community leaders through mothers' clubs, pre and post natal care through mother and baby clinics and establishing maternity facilities, are demonstrating so well what can be done.

- **Ending Hidden Hunger and Malnutrition**

Over 2 billion people lack micronutrients in their diet, which are essential for human growth and development. Lack of Iron, Iodine and Vitamin A deficiency can cause irreversible damage, contributing to child death from common illness and even to maternal death. Such deficiency weakens its victims, making them susceptible to illness, causing a vicious cycle of malnutrition and infection.

Iodine deficiency disorders are the world's most prevalent - yet easily preventable - causes of brain damage, resulting in significant loss of learning ability.

Malnutrition is a disease of both poverty and affluence. Some 170 million children in poorer countries are underweight, mainly from lack of food where under-nutrition is a contributing factor in more than half of all child deaths. A UN report published in May

2006, said that half the world's undernourished children live in South Asia, most in India, prompting the Indian Prime Minister to call for urgent action.

At the other end of the scale in our crazy world it is estimated that more than 22 million children under 5 years of age are obese or overweight as the result of poor eating habits and lack of exercise; more than 17 million of them in developing countries. This number is rising rapidly everywhere. Each is at increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke and some cancers.

IMPACT is proving that, with simple, cheap solutions such as food fortification and supplementation, salt iodisation, home gardening and measure to improve food security, maternal counselling and the sharing of knowledge, rapid change is possible.

- **Immunisation**

The development of effective vaccines and stronger national immunisation services in many countries over recent years has ensured that today over 70% of the world's targeted population is reached with immunisation. As a result, it is estimated that immunisation carried out in 2003 will prevent more than 2 millions deaths from vaccine-preventable diseases. Child deaths from measles alone have fallen by 60% following a massive global vaccination campaign.

Exciting breakthroughs are being made in vaccine technology and delivery systems which will have the power to combat age-old diseases.

But so many people still wait to benefit. Five countries - China, India, Indonesia, Nigeria and Pakistan - each have more than 1 million unvaccinated children, accounting for more than 60% of the world's 27 million unprotected children. Despite massive efforts, almost one third of all polio cases in the world occur in India. Other endemic countries include Nigeria, Pakistan and Afghanistan. 40 million pregnant women remain in need of immunisation.

If contracted early in pregnancy, Rubella can seriously damage the unborn child and accounts for over 100,000 cases of preventable visual, hearing, heart and mental impairment each year in the Asian sub-continent alone. The vaccine is available, but not yet offered in many countries, where awareness of the benefits is low.

IMPACT plays a vital part in mass immunisation campaigns and immunisation is a focus of all our comprehensive projects.

- **Water and Sanitation**

Water is fundamental to human life and health yet more than 1.1 billion people in urban and rural areas - the majority in sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern and South Asia - currently lack safe drinking water and 2.6 billion do not have access to basic sanitation. The result is a huge toll, especially on children who are at risk from disease. Solutions include health and hygiene education, low-cost treatment of unsafe water, the establishment of sanitation facilities – all measures IMPACT is advocating and trying to provide.

- **The individual IMPACT**

The statistics I have quoted are staggering and humbling in their dimension. I find it overwhelming to think in millions, but have been privileged to witness the profound and transforming effect of IMPACT's work on the lives, hopes and potential of individual men, women and children, their families and communities. People like Ashok, who is back working as a tailor now that he can see again after cataract surgery, children like Rumi, who loves to listen to music and dances beautifully now that she has a hearing aid, or little Hemant who can run freely and play football after treatment for club foot. "No more begging, school only now" he assured me.

We know we have enabled tens of thousands of people in many countries to see, to hear and to move easily again and, in turn, to go to school and to work.

We shall never know how many, many more have NOT become disabled as the result of our action.

IMPACT's track record demonstrates that many of the causes are preventable or can be alleviated, at relatively low cost. It has been pioneered by leaders in the field of disability and human rights, such as Sir John and Mr. Monsur Choudhuri, whose own lives are an inspiration to us all.

Clearly there is still enormous need for our work in each country, which has always been designed to integrate and strengthen measures for disability prevention within ongoing development, health and other related programmes at national and local level.

By preventing avoidable disability, it is undeniable that we are also relieving a prime cause and consequence of poverty and a key barrier to human development. This to me is the human face of development in the 21st century, a way of building a more equitable world, sharing knowledge, technology and resources for the benefit of all.

At times I feel so angry! Anger at the poverty and ignorance which in turn lead to children being disabled for life by something as preventable as polio or rubella, or whose development is stunted by lack of vital micronutrients in their diet, despite the fact that mankind has had cheap tools available to avert such human tragedy for most of my life.

“Be the change you want to see in the world” Mahatma Gandhi

Disability transcends national, physical, political and religious borders. It is time for a global alliance, for action to overcome common human enemies of disease, needless disability and poverty. We don't know all the answers, but IMPACT is a catalyst, showing that it is possible to change the pattern of needless disability through straight-forward, cost-effective action.

You are the people who know best; you are key agents for social change and your organisations share the knowledge and expertise to lead the way in this global and local effort – working together towards a time when no one becomes needlessly disabled through disease, lack of knowledge or shortage of services. There is compelling need and opportunity.

Imagine, one million children each year protected from blindness and brain damage, a world in which clean water, immunisation and healthcare are accessible and affordable to all, a time when the main cause of hearing loss amongst children is halved and where the disabling risks of pregnancy and childbirth are radically reduced.

Fifty years ago, these goals would have been unthinkable. Today we know how. Tomorrow they could become reality.

I ask you please to place the need and opportunity for prevention on your national and regional agenda, but don't just think and talk about it – join together and with us to make a real impact, to help protect the world's children in this and future generations. We warmly welcome new partners in our fight against needless disability.