

Livelihood Promotion for People with Disabilities

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The Challenge:

The policy makers and development practitioners are faced with one of the biggest challenges in the world today as how they can assist large numbers of people in the developing countries to have a meaningful livelihood which sustains them and ensures they can live with dignity and hope for the future. A livelihood is a set of economic activities, which includes self-employment and/or wage employment, and which enables a person to meet his individual and household requirements.

Traditionally the solution to the problems of poverty was conceived as an increase in income levels through the generation of employment. However this vision has changed in the last two decades. Now the need is to promote livelihoods as a means for poverty reduction.

A livelihood is not only for generating income, it also encompasses empowerment and the dignity of people's lives. Therefore, livelihood promotion is not only based on the principles of economic growth, but also on equity and human rights.

Exclusion:

In India, the Ministry of Welfare is the nodal agency for disability and welfare provision, this approach has reinforced the tendency of other ministries to view disability-related issues as welfare matters with no bearing on their respective mandates and schemes. Many rural development projects specifically target the landless poor who are able to provide labor. Those who cannot do physical labor often can neither participate in decision-making nor reap benefits.

The greatest obstacle to participation and equity are the attitudes of the non-disabled, whether in government, the family, the community or the voluntary sector. Disabled kin are often hidden from public view. Young women with even minor disabilities are regarded as unmarriageable. Disabled people are only brought out in front of officials and donors in the hope of attracting benefits to the village.

The impairments lead to discrimination, exclusion and further poverty. The Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for People with Disabilities have been endorsed by all UN member states. Though not legal binding, but the rules have encouraged many governments to introduce disability legislation. It's a different matter that very little of these legislations are based on a disability rights approach, thus excluding disabled people and forcing dependency.

Disability & Poverty:

A majority of families with a disabled member live an average to poor life, almost all live in the fold of their families (80% in urban, 70% in rural areas), about 30% have income-generating activities to support themselves and their families. Those with severe disabilities and critical family problems may or may not receive social welfare and other support in kind from the community. Although State and community support to PWD is still moderate in

terms of quantity, it is nevertheless an important source of income for PWDs to ensure a daily quality of life.

In India few government or donor funded projects bother to try to include the disabled. We need to think how can we give India's 90 million disabled people a chance to participate in mainstream development programs? Could a livelihoods approach help undermine the entrenched prejudice that disabled people are an unproductive burden on others? Looking beyond welfarism, we need to question whether the livelihoods of disabled people can be seriously addressed if development initiatives embrace only land-based activities.

A report from Action on Disability and Development (ADD) looks at the vicious circle linking poverty and disability. It argues that the basic cause of disabled people's poverty is social, economic, and political exclusion. The poverty reduction aspirations of donors, governments and agencies cannot be taken seriously until they learn to work with, not just on behalf of, disabled people.

The report notes that:

- Many traditional approaches towards disability are patronizing, exclusive and only reach small numbers of disabled people, mainly in urban areas.
- The move from sheltered employment schemes to facilitating the entry of disabled people into mainstream employment is progressive. However, market-based mechanisms will not lift disabled people out of poverty as long as prejudice remains deeply embedded in social, political and economic institutions.
- Disabled people's organizations (DPOs) are frequently dominated by urban-based men with physical impairments. Women, especially those with learning difficulties, sensory impairments or mental illness and people with deafblindness and multiple disabilities rarely get equal access.
- Although a high proportion of those living in most extreme poverty (e.g. street children) are disabled, they are often also excluded from assistance programs as disability is seen as a specialist issue, for others to deal with.

ADD argues that the assumption that disabled people are a drain on society is a self-fulfilling prophecy as long as disabled people are excluded and denied resources to engage with society. In this context, we need to praise DFID's recent paper 'Disability, Poverty and Development'. This recognizes the disproportionate level of poverty among disabled people and the widespread exclusion experienced. It calls for a twin-track approach: disabled people should be included in all areas of work, as well as there being specific initiatives working with disabled people. Governments, donors and NGOs need to recognize that if disability inclusion is to be achieved, active measures are needed to combat the discrimination that currently exists.

It is sad to note that:

- 98 percent of disabled children in developing countries are denied any formal education and excluded from many of the day-to-day interactions that non-disabled children take for granted.
- One hundred million people worldwide have preventable impairments caused by malnutrition and poor sanitation
- The ravages of skeletal fluorosis, a disability caused by consuming fluoride contaminated water, which particularly impacts the rural poor who are unable to access uncontaminated water sources.

- 70 percent of childhood blindness and 50 percent of hearing impairment in Africa and Asia are preventable or treatable.

Livelihood Options:

A variety of livelihood options must be seriously considered with the disabled. For example, disabled rural people could be given training in rural trades but they could also be helped to relocate to urban areas whenever alternative livelihoods options are available and people want to move. It further calls on all decision-makers and donors to:

- identify disabled persons within any target group so that provision – and, where necessary, affirmative action – can be built into development plans
- employ disabled people in the design and implementation of policy and give greater support for disabled self-help groups
- provide disability awareness training
- take affirmative action to reserve some white-collar government positions in order to assist the disabled to use their intellectual skills
- provide tax concessions and training to help the disabled start up enterprises based on information communication technologies
- develop and disseminate guidelines on a livelihood's approach to disability at all levels of government and commercial and civil society partners.

Good will is not enough. A rights-based approach to disability requires:

- Meeting the specific access requirements of some disabled people in order that full participation is possible. This may involve some financial commitment.
- Extensive training in disability equality issues.
- Provision of credit, vocational training and other services though important, must be combined with encouraging mainstream organizations to see disabled people as equal citizens and potential customers.
- If disability policies are designed without the participation of disabled people themselves they are likely to be ineffective as well as to increase the very exclusion that causes disability and poverty. Nobody knows so much about disability and the process of exclusion than disabled people themselves.
- The role of self-help groups of the disabled in campaigning for a rights-based approach and organizing skills training, savings and credit schemes for members.

Source(s):

1. 'Recognizing diversity: disability and rural livelihoods approaches in India', by Janet Seeley, October 2001.
2. 'Chronic poverty and disability: a vicious circle that can be broken', by Rebecca Yeo, September 2001