

EDITOR'S COMMENT

The debate about poverty and disability has been active for many years, and of late many international agencies have begun to emphasise poverty reduction in their statements on disability. The Joint Position Paper (2004) and the Biwako Millennium Framework (2003-2012) recommend poverty reduction as a key strategy in policies and services, including community based rehabilitation, for persons with disability. This acknowledges the fact that poverty and disability can form a vicious circle, with poverty increasing disability and disability in turn resulting in increased poverty. Poverty is generally held to be a major cause of impairment and disability in developing countries, and many kinds of impairment are the result of specific diseases or conditions that are preventable. On the other hand, persons with disability are likely to become poorer because impairment or disability places heavy demands on limited resources, and reduces access to opportunities for education or livelihood.

Although it is generally acknowledged that disability can be a cause and consequence of poverty, it is difficult to make generalisations. The relationship between poverty and disability is complex and can differ according to the context, and according to the definitions of disability and poverty that are used. However, what is undisputed is the fact that persons with disability are disproportionately represented among the poor, as shown by studies from different countries. This underscores the need for agencies involved in disability issues to address poverty reduction, and for those involved in other development programmes to include persons with disability in their activities for poverty alleviation.

The understanding of poverty goes beyond income levels, and encompasses exclusion and lack of power. Addressing poverty reduction would thus mean going beyond traditional vocational training and income generation activities that are commonly seen in community based rehabilitation programmes for persons with disability. The current world-wide emphasis on 'inclusion', 'participation', and 'self advocacy' and on the rights-based approach to disability brings out the need for strategies to address different aspects of poverty reduction.

Over the years, community based rehabilitation programmes in different countries have demonstrated workable strategies at a micro level to address poverty reduction, through access to livelihood, access to existing poverty alleviation and social security schemes, capacity building activities for persons with disability and their families, and promotion of self help groups. However, development programmes for poverty alleviation of governments and international agencies are yet to fully include persons with disability in their schemes. There are arguments for inclusion (that it reduces costs to persons with disability, families, community and governments) and against it (that disability is not a priority in poor communities, that it is a 'specialist' and expensive issue, that allocation of resources for prevention is more cost-effective). If disability is viewed from a human rights perspective, with the clear understanding that persons with disability have the same priorities and rights as everyone else in their community, the argument against their inclusion in the development mainstream may not be justified.

For poverty reduction strategies to be more inclusive and effective, development agencies should consider integrating disability within the mainstream of their development policy and practice by identifying disability as a major cross-cutting issue. Mainstreaming disability into development would mean that all policies, programmes and projects would include disability as a key issue. Community based rehabilitation programmes can be a useful resource to facilitate this process. Persons with disability must be involved in the design and implementation of policies, programmes and projects. Monitoring and evaluation of such activity should assess the impact of these policies, programmes and projects on disability reduction, poverty reduction and empowerment of persons with disability.

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