



FAO Working in Support of Persons with Disabilities



Note prepared for the *Eighth Session of the Ad Hoc Committee on a Comprehensive and Integral International Convention on Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities*,
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SUMMARY

Helping people to help themselves is the basis for empowering persons with disabilities. None are more aware of their disadvantages than disabled people themselves. Disability is more than a physical or mental limitation on the part of the individual, but links to the resources available, to an ability to make a contribution and, ultimately, to the self-confidence of the individual man, woman or child. Persons with disabilities in poor rural communities are the most disadvantaged people in the world.

Notwithstanding rights that are well-understood and regularly promoted, persons with disabilities continue to face discrimination because of their poverty and disability. Efforts to make a difference continue from governments, agencies, NGOs and others, but demand far outstrips the resources available. FAO has long been a promoter of the rights of persons with disabilities and has funded and implemented a number of field projects in cooperation with host governments. The focus has been one of teaching employment and income generating skills, and encouraging people into the market place. Information learned is re-packaged into technical and managerial texts and widely promoted for use by others.

1. Disabled people in context

Disabled people make up one of the world's most significant minorities. Estimates vary, but there is a measure of agreement in international reporting of one of the saddest statistics ever – that of the order one in 10 people are disabled and face a daily challenge for their basic human rights. Notwithstanding the equality of opportunity embodied in Universal Declaration of Human Rights which all member states of the UN have accepted as the basis for human development, about 600 million people living with disabilities are excluded from equality of opportunity. Standard rules have been devised and accepted by all member countries.¹

2. How to define disability?

Definitions of disability are complex and, sometimes, controversial given the extent of the social and economic implications that may link to the physical or intellectual impairment of people. Herein are issues of human rights, and the way in which people may be excluded socially, lack access to resources or be exposed to poverty. Disability can be considered multi-dimensional in outcome, and it may arise as a result of the impact of the social and physical environment on the actual or implied condition – physical, intellectual or mental – of the people concerned.

Disability cannot simply be categorized as a medical condition affecting people; it may be the social and environmental issues that dominate, especially for rural people in the low-income countries. Disability can be considered in context:

Disability is long-term impairment leading to social and economic disadvantages, denial of rights and limited opportunities to play an equal part in the life of the community.²

3. Policies for disabled people

Notwithstanding recognition of need and the many initiatives taken at international and national levels in many countries (but mainly in the industrial countries), it is clear that ratification and successful implementation of policies in support of disabled people has been mixed in many countries. There is considerable divergence between policies and support available in the industrial countries and those that have largely failed to be achieved in the low-income countries. Not so much indifference on the part of the poorer economies (although this is a feature of many countries) but more simply one of lack of resources and budgets that are already stretched to service existing majorities. Lack of position or profile on the part of disabled people in the community results in invisibility – and these people are subsequently ignored.

4. Making a difference

There is only so much that can be done with limited resources of funds and technical staff to promote opportunities and improve the welfare of people who live with disabilities – and then linking back to society at large to ensure their further development. For disabled people the critical concerns include: understanding disability-related issues, prevention of disabilities, providing the basis of support services, championing human rights and, importantly, promoting the role of the private sector.

Ultimately, disabled people make a contribution to their community on the basis of their ability to use their intellect and experience (if not their physical strength). Thus the importance of market exploitation, and of introducing skills, equipment, information and practical ability that will enable some people to establish small and medium-scale enterprises. Issues of employment and income generation are the basis for all community support – with persons with and without disabilities working together.

¹ UN (1993): *Standard rules on the equalization of opportunities for people with disabilities*. General information, summary and full text available at: www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/dpi1647.html

² DfID (2000): *Disability, poverty and development*. Issues paper. Dept. for International Development, London, UK. Available at: www.dfid.gov.uk

5. FAO activities on disabled persons

FAO's mandate is to raise levels of nutrition, improve agricultural productivity, better the lives of rural populations and contribute to the growth of the world economy. Fighting hunger and achieving food security for all is at the heart of FAO's efforts – to make sure that all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

Fighting hunger in the world means fighting to feed all hungry people. The rural disabled are a particularly vulnerable group: they and their households tend to be the poorest of the poor; they have special needs, but are often marginalized and overlooked in development interventions. The World Food Summit organized by FAO in 1996 acknowledged the fundamental contribution to food security by disabled farmers, noting that a large proportion of the disabled people were farmers with responsibility for the food security of their households³.

Assisting disabled people is certainly an integral part of achieving the Millennium Development Goals. This can be accomplished by boosting food production, improving nutrition and integrating disabled people into sustainable rural development policies and programmes. To contribute to this overall effort, FAO activities on disabled persons aim to improve income-generating and employment opportunities for disabled people in agriculture and related sectors; upgrading agricultural production technologies to meet the special requirements of disabled workers; fostering accident prevention in agro- and forestry industries; eliminating nutrition-related disabilities through improved dietary practices and food security interventions; and encouraging FAO Member Countries to integrate disability issues into their rural development policies and programmes.

To provide an institutional forum to address the issues of disabled persons in relation to agriculture and rural livelihoods, FAO has established an *Ad Hoc* Interest Group on Disability Matters that brings together FAO experts from a number of technical areas including agricultural technologies, nutrition, agricultural management and marketing, education for rural people, extension, field operations, legal affairs and sustainable rural development.

FAO has long been a promoter of the rights of disabled men and women within their host communities, and has recognised the need for people to be trained to make a contribution. Within partnership arrangements with both governments and specialised national and international NGOs working in support of disabled people, FAO has made small but significant investments in a number of project activities.



FAO/21326/J.M. Micaud

³ FAO (1996): *World Food Summit, 13-17 November 1996*, FAO Rome, Italy.

General information, summary and background texts available at:
www.fao.org/wfs/index_en.htm

At present, FAO operates a number of country projects and/or pilot models targeted at rural people living with disabilities. These activities are limited in terms of scale vis-à-vis the magnitude of the challenges, but they show promise. A brief summary of some recent investments follows.

5.1 Action taken

Four FAO projects are currently underway or have recently been completed.

★ **Thailand: Mushrooms.** One of the most successful projects for the disabled ever implemented by the Organisation – in Ubon Ratchathani, Northern Thailand – focused upon mushroom production by disabled people. During the period 1998-2000, over 200 disabled people and relatives were trained in commercial mushroom production, provided with small start-up loans and encouraged to establish a small enterprise. The project caught the attention of the Royal Family of Thailand with the resultant publicity that followed for national coverage of project activities. Extensive reporting, information exchange and publications resulted. Models have been proposed and/or introduced elsewhere in South-East Asia. It was an excellent result for just US\$150,000 investment.

★ **Ethiopia: Cottage industries.** More than 10 years in planning, a project centred at Ambo College of Agriculture (ACA) was implemented during the period 2004-2006. At time of reporting, disabled people and carers from over 125 families have been taught commercial and technical skills for poultry and beekeeping. The aim is one of replicating the success of the Thai project, with the model adapted to countries in Africa. ACA has plans to establish a national centre for disabled people in rural communities. FAO has invested US\$390,000 in the project/ACA.

★ **Sierra Leone: Blacksmithing.** With the cessation of hostilities from the civil war, FAO provided funds and technical assistance for 60 disabled people to train as blacksmiths/village technicians/food processors. The conflict resulted in large numbers of disabled people as a result of a policy of deliberate amputation on the part of the combatants. A two year project with investment of US\$302,000 is close to completion.



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★ **Cambodia: Village food processing.** Implemented during the early 2000s, the project invested US\$349,000 in support of training in processing, small-scale pilot-plant and supporting services for women and their families and for disabled/demobilised combatants. A range of simple and appropriate technologies were introduced as a means of boosting food security in village communities. More than 200 beneficiaries were involved.

★ **Sri Lanka: Income generation.** A request from the government in 2000 for a project to establish a training centre for disabled people in the north of the country resulted in an FAO investment of US\$301,000 during a period of two years 2003-2004. The project took advantage of resources and skilled people available within the Ministry of Social Services & Social Welfare and the Ministry of Agriculture to train over 80 disabled people and carers in horticultural production and agro-industrial processing. An estimated 90% of trainees successfully established small enterprises based on their skills training and small credit loans.

5.2 Action planned

Two pro-disabled people projects are in the pipeline, with an additional two speculative options, but there are never sufficient resources available to service the demands placed upon them by FAO Member Countries. With declining regular programme budgets, FAO makes every effort to ensure the effectiveness of every dollar invested. Thus, information generated by experience is distributed and shared. The opportunities of doing so are many, and electronic interfacing is becoming increasingly more widely available to rural people. The messages learned are those of team work, leveraging and providing leadership where in-house technical resources are available.



FAO project TCP/ETH/3003 J. Hanko

FAO will continue to support the rights of disabled people in rural communities everywhere as resources are made available.

6. Concluding note: putting ability before disability

The overall conclusion emerging from FAO's work in support of disabled people is that, time and again, persons with disabilities are capable of doing and successfully learning and applying new knowledge for income generation and improved livelihoods. Disability is not inability! In fact, the disability is in many instances less of a handicap than the disabled person's poverty, illiteracy, discrimination on account of gender or social exclusion. Disabled farmers are farmers with a disability, but remain farmers first and foremost. Therefore, it is important that disabled men and women are able to learn by doing, and that the trauma they experience because of their disability is appropriately addressed in programmes and policies.

FAO stands ready to cooperate with governments, members of the UN family, and other key actors that wish to pursue rights-based approaches to poverty and hunger reduction and are interested in improving the integration of disabled persons into development programmes.

What can FAO offer to its partners?

- ★ Unique expertise in specific technical areas: agriculture, forestry, fisheries, management of natural resources, sustainable rural development, emergency and rehabilitation assistance, etc.;
- ★ policy advice on how to effectively address disability matters in food and agriculture interventions;
- ★ synergies with relevant FAO technical programmes such as: agricultural technologies, nutrition, agricultural extension, emergency and rehabilitation operations, support to rural livelihoods, etc.;
- ★ access to FAO country offices and country programmes (presently FAO has 189 Member Nations);
- ★ experience of working with/through rural institutions such as local governments, farmer organizations, rural cooperatives, etc.; and
- ★ cooperation in advocacy and fund-raising for the well being and full participation of rural people living with disabilities.

For further information, please contact:

Libor Stloukal

FAO focal point on disability matters
Sustainable Development Department

Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN
Viale delle Terme di Caracalla, 00100 Rome, Italy.

Tel.: +39 (06) 5705 3958

Fax: +39 (06) 5705 2004

E-mail: libor.stloukal@fao.org

Internet: www.fao.org