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# Poverty and Disability: The Endless Loop

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# Poverty and Disability: The Endless Loop

**Abstract**
[Excerpt] Disability is a critical dimension of poverty in developing countries because poverty contributes to disability and disability leads to poverty. Poverty alleviation measures are unlikely to help poor disabled people who are insulated from information and isolated from opportunities and services by a de facto apartheid enforced by informational, physical and social obstacles. To be fully effective, poverty programs must take disability explicitly into account. The World Bank has noted that without paying attention to the rights and needs of people with disabilities (PWDs), Millennium Development Goals are unlikely to be achieved.

**Keywords**
disability, poverty, public policy, aid, World Bank

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## A Funder Opportunity

Private funders need not develop a new specialty nor add a new kind of project to their portfolios; it is enough to include a disability dimension in the kinds of activities they already fund. The goal isn't poverty projects to help disabled people, the goal is poverty programs to help everyone, including disabled people.

Disability has not yet been mainstreamed into development assistance programs. Relatively modest outlays that include a disability dimension can result in significant improvements in the quality of life for poor disabled people in developing countries and also, with due attention to evaluation, in important lessons learned.

We are grateful for the generous support of the Mertz Gilmore Foundation.

## Disability Funders Network

DFN was established in 1994 to create a new understanding of how private funders can integrate disability concerns into their philanthropic programs. You are invited to take full advantage of DFN's resources and expertise.

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# Poverty and Disability: The Endless Loop

DISABILITY FUNDERS NETWORK

A bridge between the disability community and organized philanthropy

# The Endless Loop

## The Disability Dimension

Disability is a critical dimension of poverty in developing countries because poverty contributes to disability and disability leads to poverty. Poverty alleviation measures are unlikely to help poor disabled people who are insulated from information and isolated from opportunities and services by a de facto apartheid enforced by informational, physical and social obstacles. To be fully effective, poverty programs must take disability explicitly into account. The World Bank has noted that without paying attention to the rights and needs of people with disabilities (PWDs), Millennium Development Goals are unlikely to be achieved.

Despite the reinforcing dynamics of poverty and disability, international development agencies have been slow to address the needs of people with disabilities within their foreign assistance programs adequately. Pro-poor funders have an opportunity to make an unusual contribution toward poverty alleviation in developing counties by integrating disability into their programming. This would not only increase the effectiveness of their funding, but also provide a positive example of how incorporating people with disabilities helps alleviate poverty.

*"Addressing disability is a significant part of reducing poverty. Bringing disabled people out of the corners and back alleys of society, and empowering them to thrive in the bustling center of national life, will do much to improve the lives of many from among the poorest around the world"*

*– James D. Wolfensohn, former president of the World Bank*

**Disability Funders Network**

**A bridge between the disability community and organized philanthropy**

## Poverty and Disability

Poverty and disability are interlinked in complex ways, each contributing to the other. Communicable diseases, including HIV/AIDS, conflict, natural disaster, and malnutrition are the primary causes of disability in developing counties. Combined with social exclusion, disabled people experience disproportionately high unemployment rates and must then incur the burden of additional disability-related expenses. Yet most poor disabled people in developing countries aren't helpless. They are compelled to cope rather than to capitulate. How they cope, and the manner in which they cope, determines the complex causal relationships between disability and poverty.

Estimates of the number of disabled people in various populations range from 1 percent to over 20 percent according to the World Bank. Disabled people are disproportionately poor, and the poor are disproportionately disabled. According to a 2004 Harris poll, disabled people in the U.S. are nearly twice as likely as people without disabilities to have an annual household income of $15,000 or less. In developing countries, one in every five people living in poverty is disabled.

What does seem clear is that most disabled people in developing countries live in rural areas; most are poor; and most do not benefit from mainstream poverty alleviation programs because of informational, physical and attitudinal obstacles. Poverty reduction programs need to take these obstacles explicitly into account and to measure success in reaching disabled people.

### *Poverty programs must be designed with disability taken explicitly into account.*

| | Today's Barriers | Tomorrow's Opportunities |
|---|---|---|
| **Outreach** | Disabled people in developing countries have limited access to information about poverty programs. | Include public information campaigns using a variety of media accessible to disabled people in both urban and rural areas. |
| **Physical Barriers** | Physical obstacles can cut disabled people off from programs and services intended for the general population and for poor people. | Accommodate functional limitations in order to avoid excluding poor disabled people. |
| **Stigma** | Attitudinal obstacles can be as serious as physical obstacles. Shame and fear are typical reactions. | Include particular measures that are designed to overcome stigma and prejudice against disabled people. |
| **Evaluation** | Although evaluation is becoming a normal ingredient in poverty alleviation programs, disability is often omitted. | Evaluation components that explicitly include disability so that lessons learned include lessons about benefiting poor disabled people. |