

**Community Based Rehabilitation Practices and alleviation of Poverty of people  
with disabilities in Bangladesh**

Bangladesh Country Paper

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**Disability situation in Bangladesh: A problem analysis**

Statistics on the prevalence of disability in the country has always been a matter of debate. Till date there is no data on disability matters that is widely accepted by all concerned. Government findings based on surveys conducted in 1982, 1986 and 1998 estimated a national prevalence rate of 0.64%, 0.5% and 1.60%. Incidentally, sample surveys conducted by national and international NGOs in the country found prevalence rates to be much higher than Government findings. Bangladesh Protibandhi Kallayan Samity (BPKS) records disability prevalence rate at 7.8%, Action-Aid Bangladesh and Social Assistance and Rehabilitation for the Physically Vulnerable put the figure at 8.8%. A recently conducted Prevalence study<sup>[1]</sup> of Handicap International (HI) and NFOWD on a sample population of 13,205 people all over Bangladesh found 5.6% as prevalence rate of disability. Some international statistics that are considered while calculating the prevalence rate of disability in the country are UN estimation that 5% of world population

is people with disabilities and WHO estimation that this figure is 10%. If these figures are calculated for Bangladesh, the number of people with disabilities should range from a minimum of 7 million to a maximum of 14 million, based on the country population of 140 million.

People with disabilities are amongst the most vulnerable of the disadvantaged groups of people in Bangladesh. Most of them receive little or no development assistance. Therapeutic services and availability of assistive devices are also extremely limited. The people with disabilities are left out of the development process mainly due to lack of awareness of people who design and implement development programs, negative attitude among general population prevalent towards people with disabilities, scarcity of resources and lack of knowledge and skills on how to address needs of people with disabilities inside development programs.

Limitation of resources restrains many organizations to initiate and expand rehabilitation and other services for people with disabilities. Government initiatives in this area are also inadequate. Training organizations have inadequate capacity to train and develop rehabilitation workers in the country. Assistive devices are not available at the community level. Most of the assistive device centres are city based and cost is high. Due to poverty many of the people with disabilities cannot afford to travel long distances to reach the service providers and receive their services. Professionals like physiotherapist, occupational-therapists are few in number in the country. Most of them are able to find employment in the big cities. As a result almost none exists at the local level. Principal caregivers mainly mothers and other female members of people with disabilities lack the very basic skills required in caring for their family member(s) who are people with disabilities.

Very few people with disabilities are involved in mainstream employment activities. One of the reasons is that a limited number of people with disabilities have the essential professional skills to be involved in economic activities. Vocational training centres hardly provide adapted skill training to the people with disabilities. The development organizations also lack the knowledge or skills to include people with disabilities in their skill development training and initiatives. Besides insufficient specialist services like Braille, sign, speech therapy, etc limits their inclusion scopes. Many employers are also reluctant in employing people with disabilities into their work force, mostly due to their ignorance about the potentialities of people with disabilities, negative attitude, the work environment not being accessible and their lack of interest to renovate or adapt the working environment befitting to people with disabilities.

People with disabilities have limited opportunities to study at educational institutes. Absences of adapted environment like accessible environment, teaching curriculum, methodologies, etc are acting as obstacles in this regard. The teachers lack fundamental training on teaching children with disabilities. The government policies and legislation of disability issue are not properly implemented.

There is lack of self-organization amongst people with disabilities. Different factors are responsible for this situation. Majority of people with disabilities are unaware of their fundamental rights. They are not empowered partially due to their low self-confidence and esteem, lack of education and other inclusion opportunities. Most of them have limited communication, advocacy and leadership skills.

Poverty has a strong influence on disability situation in the country. About 80% of people with disabilities are living in the rural areas, where poverty is much more intense. For a country like Bangladesh, poor nutrition, dangerous working and living conditions, limited access to health care, poor hygiene, bad sanitation, inadequate information about causes of impairment, and natural disasters contribute to the creation of disabilities, half of which could be preventable as DFID estimates that more than 50% of the impairments that result in people being included in current disability prevalence rates are preventable and directly linked to poverty. Poverty, impairment and disability also have impacts on families. For every person who has an impairment and/or disability, 4 to 5 other family members are also affected. These statements indicate that a large section of people in Bangladesh are directly linked to disability as a result of poverty and vice-versa. The poverty situation and scarcity of resources also limits creation of rehabilitation opportunities for people with disabilities and their capacity to access and attain much needed services. DIB study reflects that 68.9% of people with disability cannot seek medical or rehabilitation assistance due to economic hardships. The same study also found that 96.7% of people with disabilities did not get any help from organizations. All these are suggestive of the millions of people with disabilities in Bangladesh who are not receiving much needed support mainly due to poverty conditions.

### **Undertaken efforts: GO~NGO Initiatives**

The insurmountable needs for people with disabilities that exist in the country can not be dealt either by the Government or by the NGO sector alone. Realizing this, the Government and NGO communities are working in wider partnerships and collaborations to improve the lives of the people with disabilities in Bangladesh.

The National Forum of Working with the Disabled (NFOWD<sup>[2]</sup>) was formed in 1991 to raise voices to establish and promote rights of people with disabilities in the country. The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities was developed in 1995 that deals with the rights of the people with disability. In April 2001 the Government of Bangladesh had enacted the Disability Welfare Act- 2001 to protect and promote the rights of the people with disabilities. The National Coordination Committee was reformed and strengthened allowing it to be more effective in its work. An Inter Ministerial Taskforce has also been formed to efficiently undertake and coordinate different activities on disability concern. District Coordination Committees are also in its process of formation all over the country with high government officials and representatives of NGOs working on disability issues as members. To support the work on disability issues the Government has formed the National Foundation for Development of the Disabled People. The foundation provides funding support to grassroots level NGOs to help them in scaling up their activities and also provide better coordinated support to people with disabilities at the grassroots level. Disability has been recognized as both a cause and consequence of poverty. As such, it has been highlighted with due recognition by stand alone sections in both poverty analysis, and the future development agenda in the PRSP. A comprehensive National Action Plan on Disability is in its finalization stages. It has been developed and so far approved by an inter-ministerial taskforce comprised of representatives from all relevant government ministries/departments along with NGO/DPO representative and people with disabilities. The plan calls for the active involvement of sixteen different Ministries and Departments of the Government of Bangladesh. The scopes of including learners with disabilities into mainstream education along with the establishment on special education are also being considered. The issue has been incorporated as an integral part of the National Primary Education Development Program (PEDP-II). This is in addition to the existing set up of the special and integrated education centers catering to the needs of children with severe disabilities. The national building code states about accessibility for people with disabilities in all built infrastructure. It is however being further modified, with an aim to ensure its compliance. The State run television network has just recently introduced sign interpretation in its weekly news round-up, on an experimental basis, for the benefit of people with hearing disability. In the transport system, arrangements are being undertaken to

reserve seats for people with disabilities. Special ticket counters are also being created. A large variety of artificial limbs, braces and assistive devices are being produced within the country at both the government and non-government initiatives. Assistive devices and their accessories can also be imported in the country without taxes. The government has emphasized strongly in following the 10% quota for the employment of people with disabilities. Recently the Honorable Prime Minister has announced a further 1% quota for persons with disability in all government cadre service jobs. Through the Department of Social Services, the Government has introduced a micro-finance scheme for acid survivor women and persons with disabilities. The scheduled banks are also making special arrangements for allocating credit facilities for people with disabilities, under the directives of the Government. As a very recent development, the Government is taking up a scheme to provide a monthly allowance to 50,000 very poor and severely disabled persons from the next fiscal year. Being a signatory of the bygone ESCAP Decade of Disabled Person, and an active member country of formulating and launching the Biwako Millennium Framework, Bangladesh has initiated implementing activities towards addressing the inclusive, barrier free and rights based society for people with disability in the country. Although the activities concerning the Biwako Millennium Framework is still far behind, but an adequate attention and consideration by the government and NGOs have been established in spite of multifarious socio-economic limitations. The Government of Bangladesh has expressed support to UN Ad Hoc Committee on the Comprehensive and Integral International Convention on Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disability.

Alongside the aforesaid initiatives the NGO communities are also undertaking initiatives to address the issues of disability. About 300 organizations are currently working on disability issues. The movement of Disabled People Organisations and Self Help groups has intensified. There is a growing tendency of development organizations starting to work on disability issues. They are creating opportunities for wide scale inclusion of people with disabilities to mainstream development activities with emphasis on poverty reduction schemes, like skill development and micro-credit. Currently, training organizations exist that are building skilled human resources to serve people

with disabilities and work on disability issues.

But despite of all these efforts, a very minimal number of people with disabilities have benefited from these initiatives. And with time this need is growing. More resources and initiatives are required in the country to extend services for the people with disabilities.

### **Community Based Rehabilitation in Bangladesh: The past and now**

CBR practices in the country started at a very small scale from late 80s. Till mid 90s CBR programs did not expand much nor did it become popular. The main activities that encompassed CBR were sensitization, treatment, primary rehabilitation therapy, education, vocational training and income generating activities. The majority of the organizations implementing CBR were disability focused organizations and disabled people organization. Most of the activities were urban based, addressed mainly one specific disability groups, focused more on an individual people with disability, and saw disability more from medical rehabilitation perspective rather than the social development model. There were limited understanding of CBR as an approach and as a result there were no uniformity in the way CBR was being implemented in the country. The participation of people with disabilities in the planning, implementation and monitoring of CBR programs were also limited. Efforts had been undertaken in the country to popularize CBR as an approach, create a uniformed understanding of CBR and expand its implementation and coverage. It is currently seen as the most effective rehabilitation approach in Bangladesh that can reach to millions of people with disabilities that reside mainly in rural areas of the country. In 1992, NFOWD organized a national workshop that recognized CBR as an effective and sustainable approach for rehabilitation of the people with disabilities. The national CBR network group was formed in 1995 to promote CBR in the country. In 1997 the Second South Asian CBR Conference was held in Bangladesh that lead to the formulation Dhaka Declaration 1997 that in its clause 3(c) urges *Community Based Rehabilitation interventions to be incorporated in social development programs at all level* . This was followed by the Regional Symposium on Disability 2003 that in its declaration calls in clause (n) for *more effective use of Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) using a holistic, community specific*

*and rights-based approach to promote awareness, disseminate information on disability issues and provide services amongst society* • CBR activities in the country got momentum since 1997 after the successful staging of the 2<sup>nd</sup> South Asian CBR Conference. The range of activities under CBR also increased with physiotherapy, assistive devices being available, referral networks strengthened, and early detection and interventions programs being undertaken. There has been an increase on the number of studies and researches conducted on disability and CBR concerned issues. Information exchange on disability and CBR issues increased in the country. Centre for Services and Information on Disability (CSID) started operating an electronic information exchange network allowing its members to be updated on issues related to disability and CBR. In 1996 the concept of Community Approaches to Handicap in Development (CAHD) evolved in the country to implement Community Based Rehabilitation programs mainly through already established development organizations with multi-sectoral development programs. Dhaka Declaration 2003 states in clause (o) *Community Approaches to Handicap in Development (CAHD) should be considered as one of the components for implementation for inclusion of disability issues into mainstream development* • Centre for Disability in Development (CDD) facilitates this concept by providing training and related technical support to development organizations all over the country.

The increased involvement of the development organizations, disabled people organizations and government initiatives have allowed people with disabilities their family members to be included into mainstream development activities. The implementation of CBR programs by NGOs at grassroots level in Bangladesh has the potentiality of creating wide impacts, as most people with disabilities are living in rural areas. The CBR programs of these development and other organizations are allowing people with disabilities and their family members to have access to development programs of these organizations, including their poverty alleviation programs.

A directory published in 2002 by ActionAid Bangladesh and NFOWD shows that 177 NGOs in Bangladesh were implementing some form of CBR programs. Although the government has not yet started any CBR programs but there is a plan to initiate country wide CBR programs through the Department of Social Services.

The activities encompassing CBR in the country is encouraging. But what ever

efforts that have been taken at the grass roots level are still very insignificant to the insurmountable needs that exist. However there is no reason for Bangladesh to feel overawed at the situation. It can be said that the disability initiatives and CBR in the country is in the right tract and it will bring benefits to a larger group of people with disabilities.

### **Critical issues and further needs for CBR and Poverty alleviation**

There is great prospect of CBR in Bangladesh. With thousands of NGOs country wide there is every scope of these organizations implementing CBR programs for people with disabilities. The Government of Bangladesh has a strong structural setup to address social development issues from the primary to the tertiary sector. It is a strong platform for initiating CBR programs. To strengthen the existing CBR programs and initiate new ones it is imperative to address and recognize certain concerned issues, like: -

1. CBR should be promoted by the Government of Bangladesh and NGOs as an effective approach for the prevention of disability, early detection and intervention for children with disabilities, reaching out to people with disabilities in rural areas, raising awareness and advocacy for the inclusion of people with disabilities in the community, including social, cultural and religious activities.
2. CBR programs should be comprehensive including components of (a) creation of positive attitudes towards people with disabilities, (b) provision of rehabilitation services, (c) provision of education and training opportunities, (d) creation of micro-credit and macro income-generation opportunities, (v) provision of care facilities, (e) prevention of the causes of disabilities and (vii) monitoring and evaluation.
3. It should be realized that poverty alleviation of people with disabilities will not be attained only by undertaking vocational skill training and income generation activities for people with disabilities but by implementing all the components of CBR.
4. The Government should start planning, allocating resources and implementing CBR programs through its own structures. Financial resources currently allocated should be increased to support the CBR

work of more but qualified NGOs.

5. Where ever applicable, policy papers, legislations and action plans on development issues of the Government and Non-government agencies should consider disability as a crosscutting issue and address it accordingly.
6. National poverty reduction strategy paper, the PRSP should include disability issues. The programs of PRSP must be implemented accordingly to alleviate the poverty of people with disabilities.
7. More employment (self-employment and job market) opportunities for people with disabilities should be created from community level to tertiary level.
8. Effective linkages and partnerships should be created and strengthened among public sector, private sector and civil society and their roles strengthened in comprehensive CBR programs and in poverty alleviation activities for people with disabilities.
9. Physical, information and communication environment should be made accessible for people with disabilities.
10. CBR programs should be community centered and community driven ensuring community involvement and ownership.
11. Involvement of people with disabilities, their organizations and their family members at all levels of CBR programs from planning, implementing to evaluation should be ensured.
12. Strengthen education programs of people with disabilities with in CBR programs with the understanding that educated people with disabilities will in the future have more opportunities for better employment thus contributing in reducing poverty.
13. Capacity development of organizations and agencies implementing CBR should be ensured through training, follow-up, information, materials and other capacity development means.
14. Organizations that build capacities of CBR organizations should be supported and sustained.
15. Credit policies and schemes of lead micro credit agencies should be pro-disability and accessible enough for people with disabilities to benefit.
16. In cases where people with profound disabilities are unable to be involved in poverty alleviation programs under CBR, their family

members should be involved to increase income level of the family resulting in benefits to the people with disability as a family member.

17. Local governments and District Disability Welfare Committee should be extensively involved to support CBR implementation and poverty alleviation programs for disable persons at local level.
18. National policy papers on CBR and Poverty Alleviation of people with disabilities should be drafted in conformity to nationally and internationally acknowledged documents on disability issues. These policy papers should preferably lead to the development of a nation wide action plan with resources allocated for implementation of activities.
19. Appropriate, accurate and acceptable data and statistics on disability issues should be collected for designing effective plans and undertaking programs on CBR and poverty alleviation initiatives of people with disabilities.
20. CBR and poverty alleviation initiatives of people with disabilities should be strengthened in the hill tract areas and in other geographical locations where least initiatives have been taken thus far.

## **Conclusion**

The paradigm shift from a charity-based approach to a developmental and rights-based approach towards empowerment of persons with disabilities has started in Bangladesh. Disability issues are now understood more as a crosscutting development issue than before by development planners and practitioners at government and NGO sectors. CBR is gaining in popularity, which is reflected by the fact that hundreds of NGOs are implementing it country wide. It has contributed in reducing the poverty level of the people with disabilities to a certain extent in Bangladesh. But whatever the attainments and achievements, it is not enough by any means for a country of 140 million people. There are so much that need to be done in the coming future. However, we definitely are on the right track of progress.

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Some information and text for this document have been taken or translated from:-

- a. National and International Commitments towards establishing the rights & privileges of persons with disabilities ~~the~~ Handicap International and NFOWD
- b. World program of action concerning persons with disabilities: Status brief of situation in Bangladesh -- NFOWD
- c. Concept of Community Based Rehabilitation: National and International Context • CBR Thematic Group for NFOWD
- d. Disability in Bangladesh: A Situation Analysis • The Danish Bilharziasis Laboratory for the World Bank
- e. Disability in Bangladesh: Prevalence, Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices • • The Innovators for Handicap International and NFOWD
- f. Different disability situational documents of Centre for Disability in Development (CDD)

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[1] The study titled Disability in Bangladesh: Prevalence, Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices • to be referred as DIB in this document.

[2] NFOWD is an umbrella organization of over 200 NGOs working on disability issues in the country.