

## Disability movement in Bangladesh

DR SULTANA S ZAMAN

IN 1992 3rd December was proclaimed by the United Nations as the International Disability Day to acknowledge the experience and capabilities of the people with disability. The aim of the day is to reflect on issues of people with disabilities in order to ensure equal opportunities for everyone.

A major focus of this day is awareness raising through practical action. Activities are aimed at sensitising people about international norms and standards relating to the improvement of the quality of life of people with disabilities. These standards assist nations in helping disabled people to participate fully in the social, economic and political life of the country.

Situation of children with disabilities in Bangladesh is pathetic. Poverty, illiteracy, ignorance, superstition and low allocation of budget to education play a major role in the low enrollment of students at each level of education.

With such a depressing picture of children in general, it is not surprising that the situation of children with disabilities in Bangladesh is pathetic. They are the worst sufferers, and the most neglected and uncared for among children.

In 1995 Bangladesh Policy on Disability was framed by the Social Welfare Ministry. Then Bangladesh Welfare Disability Act 2001 was passed in the Parliament. The act provides the following issues: Prevalence of disability, identification of disability, curative treatment of disability, education, rehabilitation and employment of persons with disability, barrier free movement at all places etc. But sadly very little has been implemented of this Act.

Disability is a crucial problem in Bangladesh but government and non-government programmes are limited only to urban children and adults with disability. Government has set up

"Protibondhi Unnayan Foundation" with an objective to help and accelerate the programmes of non-government organisations by giving monetary assistance. Although compared to the gigantic problem the assistance is too meagre. However the NGOs are trying their best to develop programmes for the disabled in the country. The National Forum of Organizations Working for the Disabled (NFOWD) tries to co-ordinate the activities of the NGOs, provide help to them in some ways, conduct research and organise conference for awareness building of the public.

In fact the NGOs are trying their utmost to develop and provide services to the disabled in country who are totally ignored and neglected. Many NGOs have established programmes for the disabled. Today the NGOs rather than the Government are taking the disability movement forward in Bangladesh. There are few hundred NGOs who are working for the disabled. However only a handful of them are active, mainly due to lack of finance and knowledge about treatment and care of the disabled.

Bangladesh Government runs a handful of organisations for the disabled girls and boys and adults, along with a vocational training centre in Tongi. Government has established schools for the blind and deaf, one in each district. Each school has a hostel for the blind. Employment Rehabilitation Centre in Tongi has vocational training for both blind and deaf adults. In addition there is a "Hearing Centre" in Tongi catering for various types of services for the hearing impaired individuals. Audiologists and speech therapists from Sweden have worked in Bangladesh to do all work at the "Hearing Centre" which has all modern equipment for this purpose.

Rehabilitation Institute and Hospital for the Disabled (RIHD) was started in Dhaka by Professor R J Gurst, orthopedic surgeon in June 1972 to treat the freedom fighters

injured during Liberation War on private capacity. In 1973 RIHD was taken over by the government. It is however very sad that all the government programmes at present are totally neglected as the funding has been gradually decreased.

Few hundred non-government programmes have been developed by organisations working for the blind, deaf, orthopedically and physically disabled, intellectually disabled, cerebral palsied and others. Some of the programmes have been running very well under the guidance of dedicated individuals. Worth mentioning are Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralyzed (CRP), Bangladesh Protibondhi Foundation (BPF), HI-CARE, Bangladesh National Society for the Blind (BNSB), Bangladesh Association for the Deaf, SARPV (Social Assistance for Rehabilitation of the Physically Vulnerable), Shishu Bikash Kendro in Dhaka Shishu Hospital are doing commendable job. They are also involved in research.

Some organisations are involved with advocacy and awareness campaign such as ADD (Action in Development and Disability), CDD (Centre for Disability and Development) and Bangladesh Protibondhi Kalyan Samity (BPKS). Most of these organisations are funded by foreign donors. However the non-government organisations are doing far better in assisting the disabled than the government organisations. NFOWD (National Forum for Organizations Working for the Disabled) co-ordinates and financially helps the NGOs. In spite of so many government and non-government organisations working for the disabled thousands of poor disabled children and adults are left out. Due to poverty and malnutrition the disabled infant mortality rate is very high.

Today is the International Disability Day and we need to observe it by upholding the cause of disability and by trying to reach all the disabled who remain so far untouched.

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## Country profile on disability

DR NAFESUR RAHMAN

PEOPLE with disabilities in Bangladesh, in most cases, do not have access to their rights and entitlements. This occurs mainly due to three factors:

- Laws and policies are not very supportive, whatever there is, is not being properly implemented
- Social barriers and a lack of awareness
- A lack of adequate coordination amongst different stakeholders

Ignorance and wrong beliefs surrounding disability, compounded with negative and derogatory attitude of community, including family members, have contributed to the marginality of development that has occurred in the Disability sector in Bangladesh. This section discusses some of the problems that exist in the country today.

### Rules of business

One major policy that has prevented disability from being mainstreamed as a cross cutting development issue is the Rules of Business of the Government of Bangladesh. According to the Rules of Business, the Ministry of Social Welfare, since its inception in the mid 1960's has been the lead ministry to cater to all the issues of people with disabilities in Bangladesh, including education, employment, rehabilitation etc. But the Ministry, along with the Department of Social Services is not capable enough to deal with all the issues.

Over the years, the relevant ministries, in our neighbouring countries have changed their respective names, for example, Ministry of Social Rights in Sri Lanka, Ministry of Social Justice in Pakistan, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in India. In Bangladesh however, it has continued as the Ministry of Social Welfare, which is why disability issue is still looked upon as a charity or welfare issue and not a rights issue.

Disability related law and policy Existing Laws are inadequate and mostly welfare oriented. The stakeholders who are entrusted with the responsibility to uphold the laws and policies are often ignorant and/or not adequately aware or sensitized on disability issues. As such, disability is not prioritized as a rights issue and the national documents are rarely disseminated. At the same time, there

are conflicting laws and policies (eg. Rules of Business) resulting in a lack of inter-ministerial coordination, and also improper and contradictory interpretation of law and policies.

National and local committees constituted under the laws and policies are rarely active and aware of their roles and responsibilities. International charters/declarations/treaties etc. are often signed/ratified without in-depth understanding and so there remains a lack of commitment to fulfil these. Frequent transfer/turnover of policy makers and implementers is yet another problem. The process of review/amendment of these laws and policies are also very lengthy and complicated. As a result, whatever development initiative takes place is centralized.

In a country where the mere recognition of their existence is at stake, the GOB had adopted National Policy on Disability in 1995. A draft legislation, to uphold the Policy, was prepared by NFOWD in association with other NGOs, disability activists, journalists, lawyers and people with

people with disabilities.

While rehabilitation has been gaining increased prominence over the last few years (especially with the formation of a National Coordination Committee for people with disabilities, initiating and promoting the SAARC Disability Fund, the National Disability Foundation, initiating micro-credit for people with disabilities etc), the state of the present rehabilitation infrastructure remains weak, especially at the community level. Of the limited opportunities for rehabilitation, almost all are institutional based programs located in urban centers. This implies that the current rehabilitation infrastructure is ill equipped to meet the needs of majority of people with disabilities in the country, most of whom not only live in rural areas, but who are also unlikely to have sufficient resources to gain access to even basic rehabilitation services.

Inadequate skilled medical personnel and inadequate medical rehabilitation services by the government hampers people with disabilities from acquiring adequate

hospital, run by one of the Members of NFOWD, is the only fully equipped such facility catering to the rural areas across the country.

### Employment

Employment and/or self-income generation activities are essential towards economic self-reliance of people with disabilities. While the National Constitution categorically prohibits discrimination in employment in any form, employment of people with disabilities has been a farfetched dream. The government had declared a 10 per cent quota for people with disabilities along with orphans about two decades back. But due to insensitisation of employers about potentials of disabled people, contradictory employment policies, loopholes in the system and a lack of proper monitoring, the declared quota for the disabled people had never been implemented properly. In a recent development however, the Prime Minister had declared a 1 per cent quota in all cadre service jobs. The Ministry of Establishment, with the

NGOs working in the field of Disability in Bangladesh. The last five years have seen a proliferation of other local and regional level networks and coordinating bodies in the same field. While most of these are formed principally to enhance the program outputs, they are also playing some role in local level advocacy initiatives. Despite that, there still remains a lack of effective mechanisms for coordination and cross learning and sharing.

Historically research initiatives in the field of disability have been scarce in this country. With only a handful of organisations involved in this field, utilisation of available research findings has also not been as optimal as expected. NFOWD has strived to use the information from a few of these initiatives, namely in the areas of education and employment, but otherwise the use has been limited. There is only one network disseminating information using the electronic media, but it is mostly one-way communication, and also since the disseminated material is principally in English, its usage could not match its potentials. A handful of organisations publish newsletters regularly, but most of them contain information regarding their own programme activities. As such, cross learning of programmes, information on national and international research initiatives and events had not been facilitated adequately. With very few exceptions, all of the organisations in the disability sector are totally dependent on donor funding. Due to scarcity of funds, and with very little human resources, most of these organisations are stretched beyond their capacities to cater to the unending needs in their respective fields. As a result learning through exchange visits has also been very limited.

In the backdrop of all these problems the silver lining is that the government is showing a keen interest to work hand in hand with the non-government sector. Being a coordinating body NFOWD will never have its own field-based programmes, but could learn immensely from the experience of its member organisations working across the country. Based on these learnings, on the developments that are in progress at the international scenario, on our vast experience of always working with the government in the past, and also on the knowledge that we are gathering from the different studies that are being conducted recently, NFOWD is ideally placed to facilitate the government and advocate for and influence many positive changes, that could definitely bring about positive changes in the lives and livelihoods of people with disabilities in this country.

Dr. Nafesur Rahman is Director, National Forum of Organizations Working with the Disabled (NFOWD).

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disabilities themselves. It required 6 years of campaigning and influencing, and finally the legislation came about in April 2001. But this too has been renamed as the 'Disability Welfare Act 2001', deleting the 'Development' component and keeping it merely as a 'welfare' issue. Under the purview of the Inter-Ministerial Taskforce of Disability, a National Action Plan had been drafted by a team with the key support from NFOWD. The taskforce has finalized the plan, but it awaits approval in a Cabinet meeting.

The Disability Welfare Act was passed in the National Parliament in 2001 as a Finance Bill. But no funding has been allocated against the Bill in the four annual national budgets to date.

### Education

Access of children with disabilities to education is extremely limited. An unequal educational system, a rigid and unfriendly education curriculum, the ignorance and a lack of awareness of parents, compounded with the inadequate knowledge of teachers and the unfriendly environment existing in most of the institutions, has done very little to promote education of children with disabilities in Bangladesh.

With regard to special education, the government is operating 13 primary schools for people with disabilities - seven schools for those with hearing impairment, five for visually impaired people, and one school for those with intellectual disabilities. Private voluntary organisations are also involved in institutional based educational rehabilitation through five schools for people with hearing impairment, one for those with visual impairment, and three schools for those with intellectual disabilities, along with their branches in different districts.

At the high school level, the government is running 64 integrated programs attached to regular schools, while private voluntary development organisations are operating a number of schools each for those with visual and hearing impairments.

The total number of children enrolled in special and integrated education programmes is estimated to be far below 5,000. In terms of manpower in special education, 15 postgraduate teachers are trained each year through the Department of Special Education, under Dhaka University. Several other teachers' training programmes are also being offered by other private voluntary NGOs. The government has also developed a National Centre for Special Education, and it is likely that there will be a significant increase in the numbers of teachers trained in special education.

With all these efforts combined, only 4 per cent of children with disabilities within the primary school-going age have so far been enrolled in education.

Bangladesh has two independent ministries catering to education - the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education - which are striving to meet the goal of "Education for all by 2015". Yet the education of the children with disabilities is under the purview of the Ministry of Social Welfare, which plays no part to achieve the universal goal. Among the staggering 96 per cent children who are still out of education, a major (70%) portion could have been enrolled in the regular national education program with very little effort. This could be brought under a planned Inclusive Education Program. The remaining 30 per cent could be enrolled under Integrated and Special Education Programs. Yet this has not happened as yet. The second phase of the national Primary Education Development Program (PEDP-II) has just included the issue upon insistence of NFOWD and under the pressure from its donors. But how effectively this will come about remains to be seen.

Rehabilitation infrastructure and medical services According to Finer Helander's (UNDP) estimate, an average of 8.5 million severely or moderately disabled people are added each year to the total global figure, which approximately amount to 23,200 people a day. Such figures point to the urgency of finding answers as to how best to provide services and to promote integration, equal opportunities and human rights for

medical rehabilitation services. The government operates only one orthopedic hospital in Dhaka and one orthopedic unit at each of the medical college hospitals, as well as three leprosy hospitals. The government is also running two vocational rehabilitation centres for those with orthopedic disabilities. Several private voluntary development organisations are running orthotics and prosthetics workshops, as well as two training centres each for people with visual and intellectual disabilities. The lone currently functional hydrotherapy unit in the country is also run by an NGO.

After two decades, the government has recognised a couple of training courses on physiotherapy and occupational therapy, and thus there is now a scope to add to the number of the very few professional therapists that Bangladesh ever had. But the courses are not offered by the government. At the non-government sector, another center is developing a plethora of rehabilitation aides, and so far close to 500 such trained personnel are working across the country. But that course too is yet to receive affiliation from the government.

### Prevention

As Bangladesh makes progress, through its health policies on its infant mortality rate, immunisation coverage and general health care, we are likely to experience lower incidence of impairments. However, the gains due to improved health care is likely to be outweighed by the triple effects of increased numbers of impaired children surviving: increased numbers of people incurring impairments due to old age (eg. cataracts & arthritis) and widespread malnutrition. This compounded with the natural calamities and a constant occurrence of traffic accidents implies that the prevalence of impairments in Bangladesh is likely to continually rise over-time although the nature and distribution of impairments are also likely to change considerably.

The national health policies have rarely incorporated Disability issues, and so the main actors in this field are the non-government organisations. The fibon Tori (Life Boat) floating

support of the Ministry of Social Welfare, is currently in the process of developing a policy for establishing and implementing this new quota.

### Communication and accessibility

Bangladesh has a building code, which clearly demarcates accessibility options for all including people with disabilities. Yet again loopholes in the system, a lack of proper monitoring and a lack of penalisation systems could not establish accessibility for the people with disabilities. Public and private offices, educational institutions, public transportation, utility infrastructure, recreation and tourist spots, market places - almost all are inaccessible to people with disabilities. The government has adopted decisions to create separate ticket counters and reserved seats for people with disabilities in public transports. However, with the transports themselves lacking accessibility options, these decisions did not come of much use.

### Coordination and cross learning and sharing

NFOWD is the only recognised national level coordination body of

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## VACANCIES ANNOUNCEMENT

ILO/ITC (Turin) is providing technical assistance to the Central Procurement Technical Unit (CPTU), of the IMED, Ministry of Planning, Bangladesh in the implementation of the Public Procurement Reform Project and wishes to recruit two National Experts to supplement the current team. The appointment of the two experts is likely to be for a period of 10-12 months.

Service Agreements for each position will be arranged through the ILO Office in Dhaka. Only those persons having the necessary qualifications and experience, fluent in written/oral English should apply and persons currently in government service may apply, provided they will be granted leave, if selected.

Deputy Project Coordinator - (1 post of approximately 10-12 months input)

An Advanced University degree (or equivalent) with at least ten years experience in procurement and project management in public or private sector, including at least 5 years experience in project and procurement procedures of World Bank or Asian Development Bank or other development partners. The responsibilities will include closely working with the DG CPTU and the ILO/ITC Resident Project Coordinator in implementing all aspects of the project, as well as assisting in the sustainable development of CPTU as the government central procurement policy advice and monitoring entity.

Time period Jan 2005-November 2005.

Training/Procurement specialist - (1 post of approximately 10-12 months input)

An Advanced University degree (or equivalent) with at least ten years experience in developing, managing, conducting training of professionals of which at least 5 years of working experience in public procurement procedures of World Bank or Asian Development Bank or other development partners. The responsibilities will include implementing the training component of the project; planning of courses focusing at different levels for procurement professional, administration and audit staff; assisting in preparation of training manuals (in English & Bangla); training of trainers and generally assisting the ITC (Turin) Procurement Training Expert.

Time period Jan 2005-November 2005.

Applications must be submitted to the ILO Dhaka Office, clearly marked "Application for post of Deputy Project Coordinator" or "Application for post of Training/Procurement Specialist", as applicable, and should be accompanied by an up-to-date c.v; copies of testimonials and two photographs. The closing date for applications is 21 December 2004. Applicants should advise if they are able to start work on this project within 2/3 weeks of the closing date.

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## Wanted

WorldFish center seeks qualified candidate to serve as Research Assistant in Dhaka Office, to assist in surveys and data collection, monitoring activities of project and analyzing socioeconomic/biological data related to fisheries. The job entails regular interactions and communications with the Research Coordinator (Social Sciences/Fisheries), GoB local staff, and partner NGO staff, who are also assigned at the field level to work in the open water fisheries sector.

### Duties and Responsibilities:

As a Research Assistant, he/she shall have the overall responsibility for: i) collecting data as per the suggested guidelines of the Project Leader and Research Coordinator to support open water fisheries resource management research/activities, (ii) collecting information and data for the baseline and other surveys in waterbodies; (iii) collecting information and data on stocked/open water bodies and other surveys (iv) monitor the field level activities in association with the partner NGO staff, (v) assist Research Coordinator and Project Leader in the analysis of data and to produce draft report for the targeted project Research.

### Requirements:

Master's degree in Economics / Agricultural Economics / Biological Science (Fisheries) with a minimum of 5 years experience in data analysis using statistical/economic software (SPSS, SAS, STATA, GAMS), fish stock management and draft report production. Excellent communication skills in both English and Bangla are also required.

The WorldFish Center offers competitive salary and benefits package. Interested candidates are invited to send application along with a recent photograph and full curriculum vitae and names of three professional referees (including recent telephone and email addresses), in confidence, not later than 20 December 2004, to: The Project Administrator, WorldFish Center, Bangladesh and South Asia Office, House No. 22B, Road No. 7, Block-F, Banani, Dhaka-1213.

Persuasion in any form will be treated as a disqualification.

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ম্যানেজার  
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