

EXTRACTS FROM ‘WORLD VISION INTERNATIONAL DISABILITY WORKING GROUP POSITION PAPER ON WHEELCHAIR DISTRIBUTION’

International Disability Working Group

RATIONALE:

To many people who do not have a physical means of mobility, wheelchairs can provide opportunities not only to get around but also to be independent and to access education and employment opportunities. Wheelchairs can contribute to improving quality of life for those who need them. Motivation, a UK based Disabled People's Organisation, estimates a number of people requiring wheelchairs in developing countries at twenty million, and says: 'Donated wheelchairs may seem like the logical solution to the lack of wheelchairs in low-income countries.' (Factsheet 1: Donated wheelchairs in low-income countries, Motivation – www.motivation.org.uk). Well, aren't they?

There are many charity organisations of a good will who want to assist people who require wheelchairs in the majority world. Some of them have contacted World Vision and donated wheelchairs to be distributed in World Vision programme and project areas. There are a number of issues that need to be considered if and when World Vision is engaged in wheelchair distribution. These issues also apply to provision of other assistive devices such as eyeglasses, prosthetic limbs, orthotics, crutches, etc.

Four types of wheelchair provision (source: Motivation):

1. Donation of recycled wheelchairs from industrialised countries
2. Mass production and export of free wheelchairs to low-income countries
3. Local workshop. A wheelchair workshop may be a simple workshop that produces and repairs wheelchairs using locally available materials. A physiotherapist or other qualified therapist should conduct assessment and fitting based on individual requirements. A workshop may also produce crutches, canes, bars, walkers, special seats, standing frames, and other simple assistive devices.
4. Mass production/distribution of low-cost wheelchairs working with local organisations in low-income countries

When involved in wheelchair distribution in the past, World Vision used one of the first two methods: donation of recycled wheelchairs from industrialised countries, or mass production and export of free wheelchairs to low-income countries. However there are problems surrounding these methods:

1. Wheelchairs that do not meet individual body size and needs:

Very often wheelchairs are distributed without a specialist. It may be World Vision staff, a medical doctor, village health worker, community worker, or village leader who distribute chairs. Without an appropriate assessment and fitting done by a professional, sitting in a wheelchair many hours a day every day can be not only uncomfortable for the user but may cause health problems, deformity and even death.

2. Wheelchairs that do not meet the local terrain/environment:

Wheelchairs that are manufactured in economically developed countries are often not suitable for use in developing countries. Think of the road conditions for instance. Roads in most parts of developed countries are smoothly paved without holes, whereas roads in most parts of developing countries can be so muddy or filled with holes or gravel that you need a four-wheel drive vehicle. Or some people may live in a mountainous or sandy area where we will find roads that we find it difficult to call roads. If automobiles have problems going on such roads, surely people will have difficulty using wheelchairs in such an environment, particularly for those who have weak arms or who are without much strength. Not only that, wheelchairs that were made for developed countries can break very easily in the harsh environment of the majority world.

3. Problems when wheelchairs break:

Wheelchairs manufactured in developed countries are easily broken in developing countries. If the following measures are not taken into consideration, wheelchairs that are broken will just sit in the corner of the users' houses, taking up much space and collecting dust.

- Are there repair shops or people who can repair them in the area?
- Are spare parts available locally?
- Are users able to afford repair costs?

4. Maintenance and follow-up:

Very importantly, users need regular follow-up by specialist or trained personnel to see whether the chair fits the person and their needs, and if there are any problems with the chair. To be able to use wheelchairs in a harsh environment, the chairs need regular maintenance as well. Are these services available locally?

5. Undermining local wheelchair manufacture:

The following is a quote from *It's Not about Wheelchairs* published by Whirlwind Wheelchair

'If one of the goals of international aid organisations is to develop sustainable programs, that is, to help people to help themselves, then free imports of used wheelchairs from the US defeats that purpose in an important way – it undermines the development of local wheelchair manufacture. If any foreign company, in any other industry, sold its products below cost in another country, it would be accused of unfair competition and dumping, in violation of international trade agreements. Yet we applaud the free distribution of wheelchairs that cost a lot to refurbish, ship and distribute, even if these costs are hidden because they are paid for through donations, volunteer labor, and 100% subsidized shipping.'

6. Transportation of wheelchairs:

Transporting wheelchairs from one country to another is expensive and takes a lot of staff time. It takes a lot of time for the Support Office to arrange for shipment

and prepare paperwork, and for the National Office to receive them as they often have to go through bureaucratic custom procedures that sometimes, if not often, require 'fees' that do not come with the gift. Often wheelchairs and other supportive devices donated as free gifts do not come free, as there are other costs that they very often incur such as tax and bribe money.

WVI POSITION ON WHEELCHAIR DISTRIBUTION:

To support people who are in need of wheelchairs, the following recommendations are advised as viable means of sustainable development (recommendations below are in priority order):

1. If wheelchairs are produced locally, purchase them rather than import from the minority world/developed countries. Main advantages are:

- Wheelchairs more suitable to individual users and local terrain will be provided
- New wheelchairs can be purchased at relatively low costs
- Locally made wheelchairs are locally repairable.
***If your office will purchase local wheelchairs, ensure a professional/specialist runs a quality check of wheelchairs.

2. If wheelchairs are not produced locally, establish (or support establishing) a wheelchair workshop in cooperation with government, DPOs, and Wheelchair Specialist Organisations (for example Motivation and Whirlwind Wheelchair International).

Sustainability of the workshop and affordable price of wheelchairs will be key issues, but if successful, the work will benefit not only World Vision programme areas but also surrounding areas or even the entire country. The workshop can also produce simple, low-tech assistive devices.

3. If wheelchairs must be brought in from the minority world/developed countries, ensure to have:

- Assessment and fitting by specialist at the time of distribution
- Training to users and their family members on the use and maintenance of the wheelchair
- Follow-up/ongoing service of check-up for users, and of maintenance and repairing of chairs.

4. Ensure that assessment is done by professionals, not only on individual wheelchair users but also on the environment of the area where wheelchairs will be used:

- Conditions of local roads, terrain, housings and public buildings.

In 2008 the World Health Organisation published comprehensive guidelines on appropriate wheelchair provision, designed and endorsed through a consultation process with a wide range of groups in the sector. This is available as a free-to-download resource:

Guidelines on the provision of manual wheelchairs in less resourced settings
<http://www.who.int/disabilities/publications/technology/wheelchairguidelines/en/>