

# Social assistance and disability: initial learning

Governments and development agencies increasingly recognise social protection as an important component of poverty reduction and development. **Social assistance, defined as non-contributory, regular and predictable cash or in-kind transfers**, has received particular attention.

Disabled people are often identified as one of a number of disadvantaged groups, including older people and children, who could potentially benefit from this form of support. They have an equal right to social protection (enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reinforced in the new UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), and are disproportionately represented among the poorest and most marginalised people.

However, views within the disability movement on the value of such assistance are mixed. While some organisations campaign for disability allowances, others fear social assistance may reinforce historical perceptions of disabled people as dependent on charitable or medical assistance, with the focus on their impairment. Disability activists have long struggled to challenge such perceptions, emphasising that it is the societal barriers and attitudes that exclude disabled people, and promoting recognition of their abilities and contribution to society. There are concerns that a focus on social assistance could shift the disability and development debate from rights back to welfare.

Both reflecting and contributing to this uncertainty, there is little information or analysis on social assistance and disability, and

disabled people have been notably absent from the debate on social protection and in-country development of social assistance measures.

## Definitions

There are many competing definitions of social protection. Here, *social protection* encompasses a range of protective public actions carried out by the state or by others in response to unacceptable levels of vulnerability and poverty.

As well as *social assistance*, social protection includes *social insurance* to protect people against the risks and consequences of livelihood shocks; and *legislative and regulatory frameworks* that protect against discrimination and abuse.

As an initial step in tackling this information gap, the UK's Department For International Development (DfID) funded Sightsavers International to undertake a study of existing information on mainstream and disability-specific social assistance in developing countries. The draft study and other relevant research were discussed at a workshop in February 2007. This was hosted by Sightsavers and Action on Disability and Development, and brought together 24 stakeholders from Disabled Peoples' Organisations (DPOs), NGOs, international researchers, donors and government. This paper summarises the key findings and recommendations from the study and workshop discussion.

# Findings

## 1. Programme work and research analysis on disability and social assistance are limited.

- Very little is documented about disabled people's access to social assistance, or the impact it has on them and their households.
- Efforts among donors and governments to promote social assistance are gaining momentum, yet often there seems to be little or no action to ensure that disabled people are included in this process.
- Evidence suggests only a handful of mainstream schemes are actively seeking to include disabled people.
- There are some schemes targeted at disabled people, but the majority appear to be under-funded, of low value and with poor and uneven coverage.

## 2. In their work on social assistance, policy-makers, researchers and disability activists need to consider key questions:

Is it enough for disabled people to be included in mainstream social assistance schemes, or should they receive targeted social assistance? Specific assistance for disabled people might redress their disproportionate poverty, compensate for the extra costs of disability, and improve status and respect within households and communities. Further, barriers and discrimination may mean disabled people do not get equal access to general schemes. However, mainstreaming could promote social inclusion, avoid stigma and have lower administration costs. Many feel a combination of both approaches is needed, perhaps with targeted schemes to address the extra costs of disability, and mainstreaming to tackle income shortfall.

How can we improve access to social assistance? Disabled people face several barriers to accessing mainstream and

targeted transfers, including transport costs, inaccessible information, inappropriate assessment criteria, and corruption (particularly irregular payments for eligibility assessments). Possible strategies include effective dissemination of information about social assistance schemes, capacity building of DPOs to facilitate and monitor access to benefits, events such as 'one-stop social assistance fairs', and disability training for officials and service providers.

Who should be eligible for social assistance and how do we assess it? Eligibility criteria present a huge issue. The idea of a 'universal disability pension' is misleadingly simplistic: disability varies greatly and definitions are problematic. Assessments are often based on highly medical approaches that challenge a social model framework, yet alternatives are hard to identify. Assessments are also often expensive to administer, dependent on trained staff and medical facilities, and expensive and degrading for the applicant.

Design issues to consider include: how should schemes balance medical and social approaches; assess chronic illness (especially HIV); deal with temporary as well as permanent impairments; and review eligibility as people's situations change? Is income level a more appropriate criterion by which to assess eligibility – and how should that be set, given the additional costs faced by disabled people? Who decides – medical staff, communities, or social workers? Community boards may be more able to consider social contexts, but discrimination may work against those with disabilities.

Whatever the approach, it is important that the assessment and criteria are simple and transparent, workable in the context in which they will be applied, involve disabled people in their design, and maintain the dignity of people being assessed.

Should eligibility depend on inability to work? Although disability transfers are often based on incapacity to work, this is difficult to assess as it

reflects factors such as discrimination and skills as well as physical functions. Further, while social assistance could support ability to work (especially by helping with disability-related costs), if eligibility depends on unemployment, it is potentially a disincentive. No country appears to have found a failsafe solution to this. One approach may be time-limited benefits for those able to work.

**Should conditions be attached to social assistance for disabled people?** In some schemes, assistance depends on meeting conditions, such as working or attending school or health clinics. Disabled people may be excluded from assistance if the related services or employment are not accessible. Moreover, mainstream social assistance experience suggests conditions can place damaging demands on households and are not needed, because recipients make appropriate choices. However, some suggest conditions could encourage inclusive service provision by increasing demand from disabled people or their families, that exemption from conditions carries a potential stigma, and that household choice may be negatively influenced by discrimination within the family against disabled people. If conditions are used, reciprocal obligations from service providers are needed.

**Should social transfers be cash or in-kind?** The majority of regular transfer schemes for disabled people are in cash. However, many organisations also advocate in-kind assistance, including assistive devices and fee waivers. Cash gives the recipient the ability to choose how best to use their transfer, but specialist in-kind transfers such as assistive devices may be unavailable in local markets. Fee waivers face similar issues to conditional transfers: they are of little use if services are not accessible, but may help stimulate demand. The appropriate mix will depend on context and the specific needs and the preferences of potential recipients.

**Is social assistance for disabled people affordable? What is the cost of not investing in social assistance?** Little reliable evidence exists to estimate the real cost of delivering social assistance for disabled people in developing countries. More accurate costing could help effective design and advocacy. However, some say questions of affordability are political rather than technical. Further, the public costs of poverty associated with disability are large, and social assistance could help reduce these and support disabled people's productive participation in the economy.

**How could social assistance programmes interact with wider programmes of support, protection and empowerment for disabled people?** Social assistance needs to be part of a wider social protection, rights and development framework. Research suggests such policy links are currently limited, perhaps partly because of limited attention to disability beyond ministries responsible for social welfare. Possible steps to tackle this include disability and anti-discrimination legislation to hold all ministries accountable; a cross-ministerial group to ensure all departments are fulfilling duties and promote joined-up government and donor programmes; national policy and frameworks to provide guidance for all stakeholders; and effective and coherent disability-sensitive information systems.

**How should social assistance for disabled people be monitored, and how do we measure success?** Social assistance is often measured in terms of its ability to lift poor households above the poverty line. A broader range of measures may be needed, including changes in standard of living, dignity, household decision-making, access to services and coverage (considering geography, gender, impairment, and age). Key points are participation of disabled men, women and children in the monitoring processes at national and local levels, and collection of disability-specific data in general national surveys to provide background information.

# Main Messages

**Asserting disabled peoples' equal right to social assistance does not signal a return to welfarism. It is not instead of action to claim rights, but supports and underpins it.**

**Disability cannot be looked at through the lens of social assistance alone. We have to challenge the assumptions that disability can only be dealt with through social assistance and social welfare.**

1. In developing social assistance that is effective in empowering disabled people, the principles of **equality, inclusion** and **participation** should be observed.
2. Both **disability-specific social assistance** and **inclusion in mainstream schemes** are needed. Both types of assistance must be made accessible, taking into account physical, social and economic barriers.
3. Governments should provide social assistance for disabled people to compensate for the **extra costs of disability** and help equalise opportunity.
4. Income-replacement benefits should aim to **support rather than discourage work** for disabled people, allowing a flexible transition between work and benefits, and sitting within a framework that promotes equal employment opportunities.
5. Effective design of social assistance, including its links to other measures, depends on **clarifying the intended aims**: income replacement or meeting extra costs, and desired outcomes such as education or health – transfers are a means not an end.
6. Simple, transparent, country-specific **eligibility criteria** are needed, which can be implemented at the national level, meet minimum international standards and involve disabled people in the design.
7. It is essential to support the **active participation of disabled people** in the design, delivery, and monitoring of social assistance. This depends on sensitisation of decision-makers and capacity building of representative organisations of disabled people (women and men, rural and urban, young and old, different disability types).
8. Any social assistance programme must be developed hand-in-hand with **the full range of services and legislation** to encourage empowerment, promote inclusion and tackle discrimination.
9. There needs to be greater **sharing of experience** between stakeholders in different countries.
10. Finally, **more information and research is critical** to develop effective schemes. Priority areas include:
  - social, physical and economic barriers to access
  - the additional costs related to disability
  - the impact of social assistance on disabled people at grassroots level
  - the impact of conditions on take-up and service delivery
  - how social assistance programmes can effectively interact with and reinforce other services and programmes.

**Disabled people should be involved in designing and implementing this research.**

This project was the start of a process. The limited evidence available and the small group involved mean recommendations need developing through further information and discussion – **please send your ideas**. For more information, including the full workshop report and scoping study, please contact [pals@sightsavers.org](mailto:pals@sightsavers.org).