

Disability in the Developing World

"The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition."

- World Health Organization Constitution

The prevalence of physical disability in the developing world is high; one report cites that in most developing countries the disabled compromise as much as 10% of the population.¹ Incidence is felt to be much higher, although acquiring accurate statistics on disability is fraught with difficulties in most developing countries. Malnutrition, conflict, disease, and poor health care are major causes of both increased incidence of disability and decreased survival of those less physically adapted to the harsh environment of a developing country.²

Persons with disability face lifelong battles in countries where access to rehabilitation services are minimal and the consequence of physical impairment may be attitudinal, environmental, and systemic barriers to participation in society.¹ Farming, fishing, herding and gathering are for many people the only means of supporting themselves and their families.³ The impact of a physical impairment on one's ability to participate in these vital activities is significant. It has been reported that in many developing societies, disabled members are rejected from

their homes and communities; another mouth to feed while not contributing to the family's support.⁴

It may be intuitive that rehabilitation for the physically disabled is beneficial, both in terms of functional ability and quality of life.^{5,6} However, in developing countries rehabilitation services are often not available and treatment is often hampered by lack of knowledge of how to best focus rehabilitative efforts.⁷

In recent years there has been increased international attention on one particular group of disabled individuals; those injured by landmines. As part of the global movement to ban landmines, there is focus on the human costs, which inevitably includes those killed and maimed by these weapons.^{7,8} There now arises the opportunity to expose and evaluate the situation faced by disabled persons in developing countries, both landmine-injured and others who seek to survive and flourish despite disability.