



Democracy, Human Rights and Governance

Empowerment and Inclusion Division: Wheelchair Program

The Empowerment and Inclusion Division (EI), Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG), works to reduce risks to and reinforce the capacities of communities, local governmental organizations and governments to provide services and protection to vulnerable populations. Its programs and policies help vulnerable populations gain access to opportunities that support their full participation in society.

EI also manages five congressional directives and the Center on Children in Adversity. Each has its own purpose and strategy, but they share a focus on providing assistance to poor and vulnerable populations, child and adult. Each emphasizes the value of family and community as the first resort in providing protection, care and support to vulnerable children, civilian victims of war, torture survivors and people with disabilities. These are the Disability Program, the Displaced Children and Orphans Fund (DCOF), the Center on Children in Adversity (CECA), the Leahy War Victims Fund (LWVF), the Victims of Torture Program (VOT) and the Wheelchair Program.

Established in 2007, USAID's Wheelchair Program improves the availability of and access to appropriate wheelchairs and trained wheelchair providers in the developing world.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 1 billion people around the world, 15 percent of the population, have a disability severe enough that it limits their participation in family, community and political life. Eighty percent of those 1 billion people live in low- and middle-income countries, where access to basic health and social services is often limited for all citizens. However, the impact on people with disabilities is more profound.

For an estimated 20 million people, access to an appropriate wheelchair and wheelchair services could radically improve their lives. Wheelchair services include prescribing individuals the correct wheelchair; ensuring a correct fit; providing training on use and maintenance; and conducting follow-up to address problems, questions or concerns. Unfortunately, despite the overwhelming need, only a small percentage of people in the developing world are able to obtain an appropriate wheelchair and the requisite service needed to maximize the benefits it can provide.

The provision of a wheelchair can increase mobility and help empower an individual to improve his or her quality of life, but it is not sufficient. Efforts to improve the availability of and access to wheelchairs must also incorporate other critical elements. Since 2002, USAID and other U.S. Government agencies have supported programs in 42 countries and provided over 70,000 wheelchairs. These programs have also promoted greater economic and social opportunities for people with disabilities and their caregivers, improved access to buildings and other infrastructure, provided training and strengthened disabled people's organizations and disability-related law and policy.

INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

USAID is committed to helping address the severe gaps in the availability of and accessibility to appropriate wheelchairs and wheelchair services in the developing world. While many humanitarian and development agencies support rehabilitation programs for people with disabilities, far fewer provide a comprehensive approach to the provision of suitable wheelchairs and the associated research, education, and training that must inform and accompany this work.

USAID continues to partner with local and international non-governmental and faith-based organizations to directly contribute to improved quality of life for existing and potential wheelchair users in low-income countries. However, we are also making investments in global, systemic improvements that will positively impact the wheelchair sector far into the future.



photo: Motivation Romania Foundation

Robert Thorvath
Interim USG Advisor under PL109-95
Division Chief, Empowerment and Inclusion
Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights
and Governance
U.S. Agency for International Development
Washington, DC 20523
Tel: (202)712-5239
rtorvath@usaid.gov

Wheelchair Procurement

While numerous non-governmental organizations provide wheelchairs, few groups attempt to establish sustainable wheelchair service provision. Shipments of appropriate wheelchairs may provide benefit to a group of people, but the benefit will be short-term if support services, including repair, are not provided in country. USAID prioritizes initiatives that support local production of quality, repairable and affordable chairs. Similarly, regional production, coupled with local assembly and repair, offers opportunities for sustainability. When considering local or regional production, issues such as appropriateness, cost, scale, commercial viability of the source and implications for existing producers must be taken into account.

To address delays in wheelchair shipments, limited variety of products, and limited capacity to reach potential users, USAID supports the CLASP initiative (Consolidating Logistics for Assistive Technology Supply and Provision). Managed by the United Cerebral Palsy/Wheels for Humanity (UCP Wheels), CLASP has established a hub, where a variety of wheelchair products from a variety of suppliers are stored and then dispatched in consolidated shipments to buyers and service providers.

Resource Materials and Training

As with any technical sector, the wheelchair sector requires common standards and norms, adequately trained personnel, and information to ensure quality and continuous advancement. The usefulness of a wheelchair is directly related to the training and expertise of the technician fitting the chair, proper assessment of the potential user's needs, and subsequent prescription of the chair. Wheelchair users also require training to ensure they can use a chair safely and effectively. In partnership with WHO, academic institutions, and non-governmental organizations, USAID invests in the development of resources to strengthen the skills of those involved in the provision and servicing of wheelchairs. With WHO, USAID has developed five key resource documents that are instrumental to the development of common standards and practices for wheelchair providers in low-income countries. These resources can be found on the WHO website at www.who.int/disabilities/technology/en/.

Research

Research is fundamental to identifying products and processes that maximize a wheelchair user's independence and functionality. It is also critical to inform wheelchair-related programming, ensuring interventions are appropriate and effective. USAID is partnering with Jhpiego, an international, non-profit organization affiliated with The Johns Hopkins University to identify the impact of wheelchair service on wheelchair retention and use in the Philippines and Kenya. Other research efforts have

included wheelchair user satisfaction surveys in Zimbabwe, a comparison of tricycle models in Indonesia and support for the development of improved Postural Support Devices.

Professionalization of the Sector

Until recently, efforts to professionalize the wheelchair sector were done piecemeal; organization-by-organization and/or through individual, discrete projects resulting in a wide variety of standards, norms and quality of service. Today, USAID is partnering with the University of Pittsburgh to address these issues through the development of global standards and norms under the umbrella of the newly established International Society of Wheelchair Professionals (ISWP).

International Society of Wheelchair Professionals

The ISWP is a bold, new effort to galvanize stakeholders within the wheelchair sector (producers, suppliers, providers and users) to effectively meet the global need of wheelchair products and services. It is dedicated to furthering wheelchair provider training and assessment, collecting and disseminating data on wheelchair provision, improving wheelchair products and supply, promoting increased coordination and securing official recognition of resources for wheelchair providers.



photo: Motivation