

EDITOR'S COMMENT

Globally, the disability scenario today is at an exciting stage. After many years of effort, there are moves towards a UN Convention on rights of persons with disabilities, which will give a great impetus to the field, and which will be binding on governments to protect the rights of their disabled citizens. At the regional level, the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons (1993-2002) is extended from 2003 to 2012, and follows the Biwako Millenium Framework for programmes for persons with disability in this region. The period of 2000 - 2009 was formally proclaimed the African Decade of Disabled Persons, while the Arab Decade is launched from this year. All these international statements focus on rights of persons with disabilities and their inclusion in the mainstream.

The Biwako Millenium Framework, on which the other regional decade declarations are based, talks about an inclusive, barrier-free and rights based society for people with disabilities. The Framework highlights seven priority areas for action, including self-help organisations of persons with disabilities and their families; programmes for women with disabilities; early detection, intervention and education; training and employment; access to built environment and public transport; access to information and communication; and poverty alleviation through social security and livelihood programmes. If one looks at the activities of community based rehabilitation programmes (CBR) in different countries, it appears that the seven priority areas of the Biwako Millenium Framework are included, and have been so for more than a decade in some instances, under the purview of these CBR programmes. The point of debate here is: what many of these programmes did achieve in terms of rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities, having followed the priority areas as outlined in the Framework. No doubt many of them provided access to opportunities - for education, employment, information and livelihoods. Many CBR programmes have of late emphasised facilitation of self-help groups, as a way of improving community participation and ownership. Although a start has definitely been made, people with disabilities in many developing countries are still far from the ideal of an inclusive, rights-based society. Perhaps one key issue that has not been sufficiently emphasised is the paradigm shift from a charity-based approach to a rights-based one in many programmes for persons with disabilities, initiated by governments and the non-governmental sector.

This paradigm shift is rightly emphasised in the Biwako Millenium Framework. With the Framework and other global movements and international statements emphasising similar issues, it is hoped that such a shift will occur across the board. Without this shift at all

levels, including persons with disabilities, their families, service providers, donors and governments, it is unlikely that the dream of a rights-based, inclusive society, will be realised in the immediate future.

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