

Note for the press N°24  
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## ACCESS TO REHABILITATION FOR THE 600 MILLION PEOPLE LIVING WITH DISABILITIES

**Geneva** - On this International Day of Disabled Persons, the World Health Organization (WHO) is urging governments at all levels, to make a stronger commitment to the implementation of the rights of people with disabilities, to foster their participation to access health and rehabilitation services and to include them in all development activities.

About 600 million people in the world experience disabilities of various types and degrees. The day-to-day life of 25% of the world's population is affected by disability — which affects entire families, not just the individual. Eighty per cent of the world's disabled people live in low-income countries; the majority of them are poor and cannot access basic services including rehabilitation facilities. The global disabled population is increasing as a result of population growth, medical advances that preserve and prolong life, malnutrition, chronic conditions, HIV/AIDS, road injuries and land mines. During civil conflicts or other violent events, many die but the number of people disabled can create an even larger health burden.

The call for greater government commitment to guarantee services and full participation to the disabled was unanimously recommended by experts who met earlier this year at an international WHO consultation hosted by the government of Finland in Helsinki.

The consultation reviewed the impact of Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR), an approach designed to empower people with disabilities. CBR was introduced by WHO some 20 years ago and has been adopted as the national strategy in 80 principally low-income countries. It shifts the emphasis from institutions or hospitals only offering medical rehabilitation, to the community in order to work with people with disabilities in achieving equal opportunities, equal rights and dignity.

There are many outstanding examples that teach valuable lessons. In Vietnam, for instance, 80% of people with disabilities are fully integrated into society and CBR is an integral part of the primary health care system. The Ministry of Health plans to fully integrate people with disabilities into society by 2020. More than 50 000 people with disabilities live in Eritrea and the CBR programme is part of that country's efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goals. As a result, in addition to rehabilitation services, more than 80% of people with disabilities in Eritrea own land.

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The CBR consultation recommended the incorporation of the United Nations Standard Rules and the International Bill of Human Rights into governments' national disability policies. These guarantee basic human rights for people with disabilities — such as the rights to education, health care, a job and social participation. On the basis of the UN Standard Rules many national governments have formed their own legislation to ensure a better quality of life for people with disabilities. The challenge is to implement these laws. WHO will monitor progress against the United Nations Standard Rules, using data from Member States and non-governmental organisations working with disabled people.

Experts also agreed that CBR needs multi-sector collaboration with the involvement of all ministries, especially health, education, social welfare, labour, development and finance. Moreover, CBR should be a part of strategies to reduce poverty. Finally, CBR programmes must include people with disabilities, their families and disabled people's organizations at every level, reflecting the slogan for disabled people's organizations "Nothing about us without us."

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The UN Standard Rules and International Bill of Human Rights can be found at: <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/dissre00.htm>.

More information can be found at this address: [http://www.who.int/ncd/disability/cbr\\_helsinki\\_report.pdf](http://www.who.int/ncd/disability/cbr_helsinki_report.pdf). The 150 participants came from around the world with the majority from developing countries. They included representatives of disabled peoples' organizations, governments, United Nations organizations and other stakeholders such as the World Bank, and international and national non-governmental organizations.