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The Disabled Beggar – A Literature Review

Begging as an overlooked issue of disability and poverty

Nora Groce, Marie Loeb and Barbara Murray

Conditions of Work and
Equality Department

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Foreword

This literature review originated as part of an exploratory study of beggars with disabilities in Ethiopia, reported on in ILO Working Paper No. 141 published in 2013. Prepared by Professor Nora Groce with Marie Loeb, ILO student intern under the direction of Barbara Murray, the review has been updated and is published separately here, as a contribution to debates on the social and economic inclusion of persons with disabilities, on poverty reduction and social protection.

Beggars with disabilities are among the poor and disadvantaged in society. Yet they are virtually invisible in the policy agenda of countries around the world, and indeed are overlooked in advocacy efforts to improve opportunities for people with disabilities in general. This is the case, even in countries that have ratified and are moving to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The CRPD requires States to promote the right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others; and emphasises the importance of fostering respect for their rights and dignity, and raising awareness of their capabilities and contributions, as well as the need to combat prejudices and stereotype in all areas of life. Coming to an understanding of why people with disabilities end up as beggars on the streets of towns and cities around the world is important if the vision of the CRPD is to make a difference to persons with disabilities at all levels of society. It is also relevant to the discussions taking place about the adoption of a post-2015 development framework, in which poverty reduction and the promotion of decent work opportunities for all women and men are likely to feature prominently.

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Introduction

Worldwide, persons with disabilities who beg for part or all of their living are one of the most visible but least understood groups within the global disabled population. This literature review was undertaken to identify existing data on the lived experiences of these individuals and the information gaps that continue to exist in the literature about this largely overlooked population.

Although references to disabled beggars are found throughout history (Kaiser, 1998; Lipkin, 2005; Lu, 2005; Navon, 1998; Norton, 1895), almost nothing is known about people with disabilities who work as beggars in the twenty-first century. This is in many ways ironic, because disabled beggars are visible in communities around the world. They can be seen on the streets and on the steps of churches, mosques and temples, in marketplaces and public gathering spots. Indeed, they knock on people's car windows and appear on their very doorsteps. It is not that people cannot see them; it is that they rarely notice them.

Part of this oversight may be cultural. In many societies it is assumed that disability and begging are inevitably linked. Certainly, throughout the literature, there is a strong association between poverty, disability and begging. If a person is born with a disability or becomes disabled, it is often assumed that most or all other options close and the only choice left to meet basic needs is to beg.

It is further assumed that people who beg do so because they are trapped in a "cycle of poverty" and that begging is an activity or adaptation of last resort. There is a strong association between disability and poverty. Poor people are at greater risk of becoming disabled through lack of adequate housing, food, clean water, basic sanitation and safe working environments. People with disabilities, in turn, are at increased risk of becoming poor through restricted access to education, health care, job training and employment opportunities. These factors, in combination with the effects of stigma and social isolation, limit the ability of people with disabilities to be full participants in their societies and to find employment that will support themselves and their families (Mont, 2008; Braithwaite and Mont, 2008; Trani et al, 2010; Groce et al, 2011). This has economic and social implications not only for the person with a disability but also for the household in which he or she lives, and increases the likelihood of turning to begging.

Despite the strong links between disability and poverty however, the global development community, as well as the global disability advocacy community, has paid little attention to men, women and children with disabilities who make their living in whole or in part by begging. This gap in knowledge and focus is particularly striking because, worldwide, begging is among the most common and most visible forms of making a living outside the home for people with disabilities.

This review was undertaken as the first component of an exploratory study in Ethiopia that is among the first to directly interview beggars with disabilities on what their own lives and personal experiences might be. Results of this study are published elsewhere¹ but findings from the literature review are presented here in the hope

¹ Groce N., Murray B, Loeb M, Tramontano C, Trani JF, Mekonnen A. 2013. Disabled Street Beggars in Ethiopia: Findings from the UCL/ ILO Pilot Study. Employment Working Paper 141. Geneva: International Labour Organization, United Nations. 2013; http://www.ilo.org/employment/Whatwedo/Publications/working-papers/WCMS_213889/lang--en/index.htm

that these will generate further attention to people with disabilities who beg worldwide, in particular by policy makers, service providers and advocacy groups.

Begging is defined for the purposes of this review as a range of activities through which an individual asks fellow community members or strangers for money, food or other resources on the basis of being poor or needing charitable donation for basic survival, health or religious reasons.

Disabled Beggars in History

When begging actually began is unknown. Historically, as early as the written word appears, references to begging are found, with some of these references being specifically to disabled beggars. For example, in a Sumerian clay tablet from 2400BC, a supplication to a powerful lord starts with the statement "*Thy city lifts its hand like a cripple, O my lord Shu-Sin*" (Ostler, 2005:20). References to disabled beggars and begging are found throughout the Bible, in Greek, Roman and Chinese history, as well as in the historical accounts of many other major civilizations.

Presumably, in traditional societies, the needs of vulnerable individuals who cannot provide for themselves are first met by family, extended family or through group action within the community. If these resources are exhausted, many traditional societies have as the next step, organized sources of social and economic support through clan groups, religious organizations, guilds, associations or other established groups. This kind of giving is often done on an "as needs" basis, with everyone aware of the history and needs of a particularly vulnerable individual or household. But once these resources are expended, if the individual or household has more requirements than can be met with local resources, or if the individual is not willing to conform to the expectations for receiving these resources, then begging may become an option.

Begging is an activity which allows an individual to call upon people with whom he or she has no close ties for small donations to meet basic needs. It is a mechanism through which the community ensures that its very poorest members will not starve.

An urban phenomenon

While begging is not unknown in rural areas, beggars in rural hamlets and villages are rare, and even market towns and smaller cities usually have no more than a few beggars visible on the streets. The population base in such communities is simply too small; few beggars can be sustained. Moreover, in relatively small-scale social systems, the identity of the beggar and his or her immediate family would be well known and leaving a relative in dire straits would reflect poorly on the immediate and extended family. (Groce 1992) In such communities, families would presumably avoid having a relative beg unless they were absolutely unable to provide the needed support. Urban areas however, can provide both greater anonymity and a broader base for support.

It is perhaps then unsurprising that references to beggars in urban areas are found as soon as city-states begin to appear. The population of beggars in urban areas also reflects the rising population within the cities themselves. Accounts of beggars being drawn from the countryside to urban areas appear throughout the historic record.

There are a number of reasons why beggars are more common in urban areas than in the countryside. People in urban areas tend to be more isolated, know less about their

immediate neighbours and little or nothing about people who live in other parts of their city. Beggars can be more anonymous and autonomous, asking for help without having people know much about them or pass judgement on the beggar or the beggar's family, who may be unable or unwilling to support them.

The needs of poor and vulnerable individuals cannot therefore be identified on the same basis as it is done in smaller-scale societies. Instead, a system whereby many members of the general community each share a small amount of their own wealth – coins, pieces of bread, used clothing – seems to have arisen as a mechanism through which people in true need are provided for. A larger population allows each individual to give a small amount irregularly and still provides for those who beg.

Beggars in urban areas are also likely to make more money, as they are not continually requesting alms from the same limited population, as is the case in rural areas, small towns and villages. While there are few statistics available comparing income of beggars in rural versus urban areas, in a recent popular publication, Kamat (2009) estimates that while rural beggars in India may collect two to three rupees per day, city beggars can collect up to 400 rupees per day (US\$10).

This link between begging and the growth of urban centres is not only of historical interest. The unprecedented growth and increasingly rapid pace of rural to urban migration globally (UN Habitat, 2003) means that begging may well grow rapidly over the coming decades as millions continue to pour into urban areas from the surrounding countryside (Garau et al., 2005). This is compounded in times of political, social and economic instability, or when humanitarian or environmental disaster leaves many with no other options for taking care of themselves and their families (SPHERE, 2011).

Tolerance of beggars

Support is not given to all beggars equally. In every society, there are priorities about groups which deserve support from the general public and charitable organizations and groups which, for whatever reasons, do not. This has been labelled as a distinction between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor (Stone, 1984). Begging by individuals whom the public considers deserving because they are otherwise unable to meet the most basic of needs – such as the need for food, housing, and clothing – is tolerated; begging by those the public perceives as undeserving because they are “lazy” or “choose not to work” is not.

Throughout history, popular culture has been full of stories and folklore about beggars who take advantage of the system: begging when they do not need to; making far more money than people with “real” jobs; or stories of non-disabled individuals pretending to be disabled in order to make money through begging (Conan Doyle, 1892; Kumarappa, 2007; Srivastava, 2008; Al-Harazi, 2006; Swissinfo, 2009; Borland, 2009). Examples of people begging when they are not impoverished have gained considerable press attention in several countries in recent years. In Pakistan, for example, it has been reported that some middle-class people have added to their income through begging after working hours (ILO, 2004a). Several years ago, Yemen was abuzz with reports of “seasonal begging”, with families whose earnings were otherwise well above the poverty line turning to begging at certain periods of the year to meet electrical bills and health expenses (Al-Harazi, 2006). In Morocco, a government survey found that 62.4 per cent of beggars had bank accounts and a number had procured real estate with the money they collected from begging (Lahcen, 2008).

Individuals who beg but who could really earn their living from other sources – the “undeserving poor” – are almost universally regarded with ill-favour. They are seen as taking advantage of a system of support intended only for the very needy. Furthermore, begging by those who are “undeserving” is in many countries also associated with drug or alcohol abuse and antisocial or criminal behaviour, where those who beg are either seen as a threat to the social order or as victims of others who use them for their own ends. For example, in both developed and developing countries within the past decade, there are reports of groups or gangs of people organized to beg, often by criminals or others who seek to profit from their efforts (SwissInfo, 2009; Walker, 2006; Ranga, 2009; Kamat, 2009). Such organized begging is often further linked to corrupt police officers or government officials who are willing to be bribed in order to allow begging to continue undisturbed. This is a factor that further contributes to fear among the general public of the antisocial and illegal nature of such activities (Malone, 2009; ILO, 2004a; Rawa News, 2008).

While begging is also practiced by the non-destitute at certain times, such as during religious pilgrimages, in this literature review no society could be identified which considers begging a viable option for healthy adults of working age. Nor is it considered a viable option for children or the elderly unless they are without other means of support. In general, begging is seen as the last resort for people who have found themselves in a downward spiral of poverty and adversity.

In societies where begging is common, women with infants and children often head the list of those considered justified in begging. This is especially the case in places where there are limited options for women if abandoned or widowed. The frail and elderly also are usually considered worthy. But in all societies, begging has been routinely considered an acceptable way, and in some cases the only way, for people with disabilities to make a living outside the home.

What makes people with disabilities decide to beg?

Lost in this larger literature is a discussion of why some people with disabilities choose to beg. Presumably, the decision is based on a series of variables, including personal circumstances, the lack or perceived lack of alternatives, the need to provide for oneself, one’s family or others, as well as factors such as the psychological makeup of the individual involved. As will be explored in greater detail in this review, a combination of factors appears to be involved.

Cultural attitudes towards begging may also be a factor in the decision to beg or to avoid begging. For example, where autonomy and self-sufficiency is stressed, begging may be considered a particularly demeaning option. Where religious teachings praise people for giving to those less fortunate, begging may be less frowned upon and beggars may be seen as contributing to the welfare of society. As one frail older man sitting on the steps of a Hindu temple in India carefully explained, “I help people get into heaven. They give me alms; they get favour from the gods.” (Groce: unpublished interview, 2010).

Lack of social support networks

The literature suggests that, cross-culturally, a key factor that makes some individuals turn to begging may be the lack of social support networks upon which the very poorest can rely if a crisis or emergency wipes out their limited resources. A large literature in poverty and development has helped identify how a crisis at a critical juncture – a health crisis, the loss of a crop, a home or a set of tools – pushes those

who are already poor into destitution. Such factors must also play a part in tipping some people with disabilities already living in poverty over the dividing line between income-generating work – however limited – and begging (Groce et al., 2011b). There are currently no statistics either on the numbers of people with disabilities who live by begging or on the percentage of the larger disabled population that this constitutes. In 1998, it was reported that 11 per cent of all unemployed people with disabilities in Africa survive solely on money acquired through begging (Ndiaye, 1998), although the relatively small sample size of the study limits the extent to which the findings can be taken as genuinely representative for all of Africa. Comparable data are unavailable for other regions.

Internalized social stigma

The decision to work as a beggar may not be wholly economic. Some have argued that adoption of begging as a means of survival by people with disabilities is linked to their internal acceptance of social stigma (Ebimomi, 2008). Stone (1984) notes that characteristics associated with disability, such as low productivity and helplessness, become cemented into the minds of people with disabilities who prefer to accept the role constructed for them; to beg rather than struggle to find employment opportunities. Arguing that people with disabilities beg because they have “internalized” prevailing social stigma, however, often “blames the victim” without considering larger social, cultural, economic and political pressures. Nor does it explain why some people with disabilities choose to beg and others with comparable disabilities from similar backgrounds do not. Raising yet another point, Thurer (1988) has argued that in some cases, begging is a choice made by people with disabilities to preserve their autonomy, even when alternative sources of support are available to them.

Education and skills levels

Another key question is why begging might be seen as the best or only option available, either by the individuals or the society in which they live. The literature on poverty and disability indicates that begging may be the result of a series of “knock on” events in the lives of people with disabilities and not just as a single decision based on perceived limited choices of livelihoods. People who are born with a disability or who become disabled in childhood or adolescence are often excluded from mainstream education or job training, face social exclusion from the general community, and experience a lack of family support and low self-esteem (Centre for Services and Information on Disability, 1999; Kennedy and Fitzpatrick, 2001; Parnes et al., 2009; WHO/World Bank, 2011; Groce and Bakhshi, 2011a). Those who acquire a disability later in life may find that their education, skills and work history count for little if they are unable to perform their previous job and if rehabilitation and retraining are unavailable. Furthermore, individuals who are already poor before becoming disabled have fewer resources or little “start-up” capital to enable them to take up another line of work. These factors, combined with social stigma and exclusion from family and community networks, often make it difficult or impossible for people with disabilities to locate and maintain employment in either the formal or the informal economy.

Limited employment prospects

While much of the data available on employment rates among people with disabilities have been framed by statistics on the formal employment sector in developed

countries, in developing countries much of the labour force, including people with disabilities, engages in the informal economy. In such economies millions of people with disabilities lack the financial resources and the entrepreneurial skills needed to begin even the smallest of enterprises (Ingstad and Grut, 2007; Handicap International, 2006).

Statistics collected in developing countries tell us little about the informal economy, but they do reflect strikingly lower employment rates among persons with disabilities that, in the absence of social protection floors or disability benefits, may help explain why persons with disabilities may turn to begging. In Zimbabwe, for example, less than 1 per cent of disabled people participate in the formal workforce (Disability Awareness in Action, 1995; Beresford, 1996). In Paraguay, 18.5 per cent of people with disabilities are employed in the formal workplace compared to 59.8 per cent of non-disabled people (DGEEC, 2002), and 29 per cent of disabled Chileans work in the formal economy compared to 57 per cent of non-disabled Chileans (INE Chile, 2000). Data collected by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found employment rates for people with disabilities in its member countries of just over 40 per cent in the late 2000s, compared to 75 per cent for non-disabled people (OECD, 2010). Nor are these markedly lower levels of employment confined to low- and middle-income countries. The United States Department of Labor concluded that rates of employment among people with disabilities in the United States were about half of those for non-disabled people (Fremstad, 2009), with roughly 37 per cent of people with disabilities aged 21-64 employed, compared to 78 per cent of non-disabled individuals within the same age range. In the United Kingdom it is estimated that only 40-50 per cent of people with disabilities of working age are currently employed compared with 80 per cent of non-disabled people (The Poverty Site, 2011; Shaw Trust, 2011).

Nor are problems limited to the presence or absence of a job or self-employment. People with disabilities are generally likely to be the “last hired” and “first fired”, so that in times of economic downturn, people with disabilities with formal jobs are often first to join the ranks of the unemployed, and those who are self-employed often find their ability to sell small items or provide unskilled services is severely curtailed (Barnes and Roulstone, 2005; Groce et al., 2011b; Parnes et al., 2009). Even when able to keep their jobs or maintain themselves through self-employment, most of the positions they secure have little or no upward mobility, and thus people with disabilities are significantly less likely than non-disabled co-workers to be promoted or to get a raise.

Modified forms of begging are also common in a number of countries which have “protected” areas of work for persons with disabilities. Playing musical instruments, singing, and working as a masseur for example, are trades widely reported in the historic literature as being a speciality of blind people. In more modern times, the right to sell lottery tickets or newspapers is often allocated to people with visual impairments or physical disabilities. The practice of selling sign language alphabet cards by people with hearing impairments, although looked down upon by fellow members of the Deaf community (Higgins, 1979; Buck, 2000) continues to be found in some countries. While such activities are often defined as “work” in many countries, the selling of lottery tickets and other small items is viewed widely by the public as an organized form of charity for people with disabilities (Higgins, 1979). Sale of such items is often combined with begging, as the amount of return for the disabled person on the sale of these items is often extremely limited (Buntan, 2005; The Nation, 2005).

Social protection floors

In countries with established social protection systems and dedicated disability benefits for those who do not have paid work, or for those whose paid work does not cover all expenses, begging by people with disabilities appears to be far less common (Grosh et al., 2008; Medeiros et al., 2006; Mitra, 2005; Mont, 2010). Ideally, such social protection schemes should provide a safety net, allowing individuals with disabilities and their families to meet basic needs with dignity and choice. However, even in countries with social protection schemes, benefits are often not sufficient to meet all needs of people with disabilities (Groce, 1984; Thurer, 1988). In some countries, eligibility restrictions and the complexity of application processes mean that many people with disabilities do not receive the benefits to which they are entitled. And in some countries, certain people with disabilities continue to beg even when funding is available and support systems work well, possibly because, as Thurer (1988) suggests, it allows them autonomy from the existing systems that place them in the position of dependents or objects of charity.

Downward spiral of poverty

Over time, an unemployed and impoverished disabled person's situation may be further exacerbated by lack of basic housing, or lack of access to food and clean water, health services and social support networks, creating a vicious cycle of poverty, ill-health and social marginalization (Parnes et al., 2009). The result is that people with disabilities are significantly over-represented among the poor and under-represented within national workforces (Braithwaite and Mont, 2008; Thomas, 2005; WHO/World Bank 2011). This is true of both developing and developed countries and of the formal and informal economies (Kassah, 2008; Ingstad and Grut, 2007; Handicap International, 2006).

In light of these challenges, the decision to trust to one's own efforts to earn a living by begging may be a rational economic decision, no matter what the social and psychological toll the individual incurs. Thus people with disabilities may turn to begging simply because they have no other options open to them or they may choose to beg given the limited range of options they face.

Organized begging, forced begging and intentional maiming

Review of the literature also shows that begging for people with disabilities may not be simply an individual decision. Families may encourage members to beg, especially if they have some attribute, such as a visible disability, which would give them an "advantage" over non-disabled beggars.

Organized groups of disabled beggars are found in some countries and these groups may represent unified social support mechanisms and protection for beggars. In India, for example, "Beggar Brotherhoods" have been reported (Kumarappa, 2007). Organized begging among non-disabled individuals has also been reported in developed countries such as Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States (Swissinfo, 2009; Buck, 2000; Dean, 1999).

While groups may be formed by beggars, there are also frequent reports in the literature of people with disabilities and others being coerced into begging by "businessmen" or criminal gangs (often referred to as "beggar mafias") who keep the profits. Many who beg under such circumstances exist in virtual slavery with the continual threat of mistreatment, violence or death. In such systems, people with disabilities are often seen as more profitable than non-disabled beggars because they

evoke sympathy or pity (Walker, 2006; Saini, 2009; Malone, 2009). Indeed, it has been reported in the folklore and popular culture of many countries that children with disabilities are routinely sold or stolen – usually from rural areas – to be used by criminals or gangs of beggars (Malone, 2009). Disabled children are especially vulnerable to being forced into this type of begging, although disabled adolescents and adults are also at great risk (Kumarappa, 2007; Datta, 2007; Ingstad and Grut, 2007; Kilbride et al., 2000; Sayem 2011; Ranga, 2009; Wonacott, 2004). The frequent mistreatment of disabled child beggars is so common in India that Malone (2009) reports that members of the public now refuse to give disabled child beggars any donations, knowing that it will only end up in the hands of their “handlers”.

The practice of maiming children in order to use them as beggars has been referenced in folklore for centuries. There is almost no documentation on this, however, and what does exist is largely anecdotal. The practice exists without a doubt, but its extent may differ significantly between countries, and the percentage of such individuals among those people with disabilities who beg, is as yet unknown. Bibars (1998), writing on street children in Egypt, identified two of the nine children whose case histories she gives as children intentionally maimed by relatives in order to enhance their ability to beg (a girl, partially blinded by her father at age 5; a boy “forced to lose both his legs” by an uncle at age 6). Malone (2009) reports a case of two doctors working in a government hospital in India who were said to have been paid US\$200 for each amputation they performed on a healthy child. Recent articles and newspaper accounts from India and Ethiopia also report non-disabled children being purposely maimed, either by having acid poured onto them, or by being physically maimed in order to increase the amount of money they can earn as beggars (Africa News, 2008; Malone, 2009; Demewozu, 2003). The practice of more severely injuring already disabled children and adults to make them capable of bringing in more money as beggars has also been documented in recent years (Wonacott, 2004; Groce, 2006; Africa News, 2008; Malone, 2009; Demewozu, 2003).

Whether intentionally disabled in order to beg, or disabled by other causes and then encouraged or forced to beg, disabled children and adults are often brought to the streets by people other than their families. A number of scattered reports have also documented the fact that children and adults with disabilities are often taught to beg (Centre for Services and Information on Disability, 1999). A training centre in Rohini’s Lal Quarters in Delhi, India was discovered to be run by a “beggar gang” which trained non-disabled children in the use of crutches and then forced them to pay 10-20 rupees in commission at the end of the day (Stone, 1984). Reports from Africa and India describe both disabled children and adults being taught to play music in order to evoke more sympathy or to perform stunts or tricks to amuse the crowd as they beg (Demewozu, 2003; Kumarappa, 2007; Datta, 2007). Mufti Imran, a researcher for Save the Children in Dhaka, writes that disabled child beggars are “taught different ways and nuances of begging such as the most appropriate place to beg, the kind of people one should approach, the kind of dialogues and mannerisms that would make everyone sympathize” (Ranga, 2009; Andrabi, 2009). Training people with disabilities to be more effective beggars is unfortunately nothing new. Kanner (1964) notes that blind boys were trained to beg in ancient Rome.

Literature on intervention

Reflecting the scarcity of research, policy and programming concerning begging in general and disabled beggars in particular, there is limited discussion of how people with disabilities can be kept from having to resort to begging in the first place or what

sustainable routes out can be called upon for people who are currently working as beggars (Kennedy and Fitzpatrick, 2001). Attempts at criminalizing or arresting beggars have not proved particularly effective (Lynch, 2005; Rahman, 2009; Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2008). Such practices may simply encourage beggars to change location, rather than change their way of life (Lynch, 2005), or give them criminal records that make it harder still to find work. Simply removing beggars from the streets does not provide them with other means of survival, nor prevent them from returning to the streets (The Hindu, 2006; Burke, 1999).

In several countries, small-scale programmes for people with disabilities who currently work as beggars have been initiated. In the Gambia, for example, the government has set up a series of small income-generating projects, such as providing disabled beggars with phone cards to sell on the streets (The Gambia, 2009), and the Anirank Foundation in Nigeria has undertaken similar work (Ebimomi, 2008). Plans have been made in Hyderabad, India for the rehabilitation of all beggars, including disabled beggars, with NGOs designing projects to break the links between begging and poverty (Ranga, 2009). In Morocco, the government requires local authorities to establish centres for beggars, who participate in government-led rehabilitation programmes (Ali, 2009). A pilot programme was launched in Kaduna, Nigeria in April 2009 to help disabled people recognize their potential through vocational training (Haruna, 2009). In all these cases however, the long-term sustainability and success of these programmes remains unclear.

There is strikingly little information in the literature of examples in which employment schemes or income-generating programmes intended for the wider disabled population either were specifically directed towards – or indirectly reached – disabled beggars. And in this literature review, we were unable to find any examples in which employment programmes or poverty alleviation schemes intended for the general population were able to reach this population. In 2011-2012,

Groce et al (2013; 2014) undertook one of the first in-depth field studies of disabled street beggars in urban Addis Ababa. Persons with disabilities were interviewed about how they came to beg, their daily life experience and routines and their aspirations for the future. Those interviewed were found to be a more heterogeneous group than originally anticipated, with a substantial number having some education and some work experience (whether in the formal or informal sectors).. These individuals were, on the whole, highly proactive and engaged in a number of strategies to maintain themselves and their families while attempting to climb out of poverty. They had chosen to beg as a rational response to an extremely limited set of options with which they were confronted. The potential identified within this group allowed the researchers to identify a series of points where targeted intervention by governments, UN agencies, NGOs and disabled people's organizations (DPOs) could help break the on-going cycle of disability and begging. These include development of educational, skills development and livelihood opportunities for people with disabilities in rural communities to stem the flow of impoverished rural/urban disabled migrants; better coordination of medical and surgical care in regional clinical centres in coordination with local clinics and health centres; improved safety regulations and provision of vocational rehabilitation for those who become disabled while in a job; and focused attention by disability advocacy groups to this section of the population of persons with disabilities .

Information gaps

So little is known about people with disabilities who work as beggars that many basic questions remain largely unexplored cross-culturally: What alternative forms of employment exist for these individuals? Where and with whom do these people live? What family and social support networks do they have? What happens to them over the course of their lives? What are the links between education, job training and the decision of whether or not to beg? How do disabled women fare on the streets, given the significant disadvantages they face even in comparison to men with disabilities? What is the interplay between violence, disability and begging?

There are many other questions as well. Are individuals who beg able to keep the money they collect or are they put on the streets by organized gangs who take the money? How do they manage this money in a way that allows them to live and support their families? Is there any evidence of a practice of maiming individuals (especially children) to disable them and use them as beggars? This is a practice that has been referenced in literature and folklore for centuries, although it has almost never been documented. Is it really the case that disabled individuals who beg bring in far more money than others who choose not to beg (a view repeatedly expressed by many disability advocates and experts interviewed in the course of the Ethiopia study (Groce et al 2013) that proved to be untrue)? What does the surrounding community think of these people? What do local disability advocacy groups think of these practices? What do persons with disabilities themselves think of these practices? How do persons with disabilities who beg see themselves or the lives they lead? When and under what circumstances are some persons with disabilities able to leave begging and what happens to them afterwards?

Finally – and most importantly – what interventions can provide viable and sustainable alternatives to begging for people with disabilities? How can individual, social and cultural attitudes be changed such that begging is no longer seen as an appropriate ‘role’ for persons with disabilities, but rather a failure in society to provide viable alternatives to the poorest of its disabled citizens?

Conclusion

This literature review is part of what is anticipated to be a series of studies on disabled beggars by the co-authors of this paper. It is hoped that the review will also encourage other researchers, policy makers and advocates in international development, public health, economics and disability to also begin to look more closely at those people with disabilities who beg for part or all of their livings – as well as to question societies, cultures and economic systems where such a role is considered appropriate or even tolerable for so many.

It is important to consider, as increasing numbers of countries move from low- to middle-income status, and as the world community implements the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and begins to negotiate the new Sustainable Development Goals which will replace the Millennium Development Goals, that disabled beggars should no longer remain outside the policy debate. As this literature review has shown however, relatively little research has been undertaken on this largely invisible population. Far more research and documentation is needed to understanding this group if viable alternatives to begging on the street are to be generated for persons with disabilities.

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