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Queensland University of Technology
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Submission to the AusAid Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness

The focus of this submission is the area of disability, which has been one of the priority areas for AusAID. While this is commendable, given that disability constitutes a major issue in developing countries, we argue that the delimitation of AusAID's action on disability is too circumscribed and fails to sufficiently take into account the social and cultural context in which disability is experienced.

It is estimated that two-thirds of the world's people with a disability live in Asia and about 80% live in developing countries. While a substantial proportion of people are born with a disability, disability through injury continues to be a problem in the developing world, in part due to economic development and increasing motorisation. The vast majority of these people also live in poverty.

To date, AusAID's preferred approach to disability has been to fund projects which take for granted a Western conceptualisation of disability in an individualistic sense. In practice, there is considerable research which demonstrates that "disability" is not a concrete, well-defined category, but varies from culture to culture in how it is constructed and experienced. In contrast to the individualism exhibited in Western societies, the disability of a person in a developing country is often experienced by the extended family group and the community. Therefore the impact of disability is much more widely felt. At times, depending on the nature of the social and cultural construction of disability in a particular country, the individual may be supported by the family, but both individual and family may be ostracised by society, in ways which interfere with the delivery of services and support. It is hard to understand how this operates without developing a good understanding of the lived experience of disability in the particular social and cultural context. The literature on disability shows that an understanding of the social and cultural construction of disability, and the influence of political and economic factors is crucial in developing a full picture of the impact of disability in these countries. It is difficult to fully understand how aid can be successfully delivered if there is little knowledge of the lived experiences of these vulnerable people and that of their family and community.

AusAID's efforts in addressing disability in developing countries would be more effective if properly informed by an in-depth understanding of this social and cultural context. Again, research experience has shown that such knowledge is not necessarily found among doctors and senior officials, who are often much more Western in outlook than ordinary people in their country. There is no replacement for properly conducted research to inform the development of effective programmes for disability. To provide an example:

- Research conducted in Northeast Thailand illustrated the need for more qualitative approaches in understanding disability through interviews with service providers, men with spinal cord disability and their families.

- The findings from this small project provided local service providers with valuable knowledge about their clients.
- It also showed a gap in technical expertise that could be fulfilled with targeted training, similar to the ALAF scheme - allowing, those directly involved with continuing care of, and contact with, people living with disabilities (including nurses and social workers) thereby building capacity in low and middle income countries.

Australia should play a leadership role to ensure more active, outcome driven research and training is conducted to provide the frameworks for successful aid programmes directed at disability, development and poverty with continued focus in the Asia- Pacific Region.

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On behalf of Social Work and Human Services
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