Helping people to help themselves

A small British charity is empowering people with disabilities through the development of sustainable community programmes in some of the world’s poorest countries. HEATHER BERESFORD reports

Hail a rickshaw in Angola and the chances are the driver will be an amputee. With the help of a small London-based charity, a cooperative of disabled people living in slums near Luanda, Angola’s capital city, has set up a highly successful auto-rickshaw service. Not only is the project helping amputees earn a living, but it also provides a much-needed transport service for disabled people visiting local rehabilitation centres.

Millions of adults and children lose limbs every year to diseases like polio or diabetes, landmines and road traffic accidents. And charities like the Jaipur Limb Campaign (JLC) are working tirelessly to help victims build an active life.

Taking its inspiration from the Jaipur (pronounced Ji-poor) foot, a cheap prosthetic foot used in many developing countries across the world, the charity’s first objective is to help people who have lost limbs or the use of their limbs.

JLC focuses on sustainable programmes, working with a network of partner organisations in some of the poorest countries of Asia and Africa. The network shares expertise and JLC has recently helped one of its biggest partners, Mobility India, run a year-long training course in community physiotherapy, prosthetics and orthotics for local community rehabilitation workers, some of whom are also disabled.

Nasreen Milly Jahan’s foot was blown off by a piece of shrapnel when she was just 18 months old, as her family fled from shelling by liberation forces in Bangladesh. Now, nearly 30 years later, Nasreen has just qualified as a community physiotherapist and is working at the Limb and Brace Centre in Dhaka, Bangladesh, using her training and experience to help children cope with the challenges of rehabilitation.

Amputees need support all their lives—the prosthetics alone need replacing every two years or so. But overcoming the physical disability is only half the battle. ‘Our main challenge is empowering disabled people,’ says Kamala Achu, director of the JLC. ‘We persuade people they are capable of living a full life. Every country has a disability act and everyone has a right to be mobile.

‘Many parents of disabled children are desperate to improve their children’s lives but don’t know where on earth to turn for help. Tragically, they often conclude their disabled child has no prospects.

‘So our community rehabilitation volunteers assess disabled children, help the family understand what is wrong, and explain how their child can get better.

We explain how they can walk using a combination of braces, prosthetic limbs, surgery, physiotherapy or exercise. And we discuss ways disabled children can attend school, using special seating, for example.'
If disabled children living in poverty don't receive help, they are likely to become marginalised, isolated and excluded from school and work. They are also unlikely to marry, which is critical for women in many cultures.'

When Tahseena was little she had polio in her left leg, which severely affected her mobility. Her conservative Muslim family was terrified surgery would make her worse. But Mobility India persuaded the family to go ahead. The operation was a success and after weeks of therapy and exercise, Tahseena was fitted with a plastic caliper. A local Mobility India cooperative gave her family funding to run a bike shop. And as her mobility increased, Tahseena's confidence levels shot up - she has just married.

'Tahseena's life has been transformed,' says Ms Achu. 'She married Mubarek Pasha, an able-bodied man, in a love match - quite an unusual event in itself.'

But it's even more unusual for a disabled girl to get married. Her family is delighted and considers her "totally rehabilitated".

In the Banashankari slum in Bangalore, JLC is also helping disabled children take their first vital steps into learning at 'bridging courses', giving kids a taste of schooling and helping their parents understand the value of education.

The charity secures most of its funding from Comic Relief, the UK Department for International Development, the Community Fund (National Lottery), large trusts and individual supporters. And nearly every penny is sent to help partner organisations achieve their goals.

'Funding helps us respond to the many requests we get from disability organisations in developing countries,' says Ms Achu. When I've seen children fitted with their first limbs, no matter how shy they seem, you can see they are inwardly thrilled and deeply excited. It reminds you exactly why you are working so hard to help.'

Links

The Jaipur Limb Campaign is keen to relationship with the CSP.

Trainees on this year's community physiotherapy courses in Bangalore are sponsors, or you can raise funds on an organised sponsored walk in the Lake District on August 19 to 23.

If you would like to find out more about Campaign, ring Kamala Achu or Maggie Owen on 020 7700 7298 or email: mail@jaipurlimb.org

To donate online, click the Charities Aid button at: www.jaipurlimb.org