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What we can learn from embracing diversity

Walkabout Foundation is an international NGO with the mission of restoring dignity, freedom and independence by providing wheelchairs and rehabilitation services in the developing world, and funding research to find a cure for paralysis.

To date Walkabout has funded over 1 million dollars of groundbreaking medical research into spinal cord injuries, and donated over 10,000 wheelchairs in 21 countries, impacting the lives of an estimated 30,000 individuals. In 2016 we took our mission one step further and opened our first day care centres in India and in Kenya, where every day we provide crucial rehabilitation therapies to 30 children, with the aim of integrating them into mainstream education over the course of a 1-2 year period. For 2017 we are planning on opening our first wheelchair assembly line in Kenya, mainly employing wheelchair users who otherwise have very few or no employment opportunities. We are also establishing a local wheelchair basketball team, to further fight stigma by setting an example in the local community.

For the 65 million people across the world who don't have access to one, a wheelchair means more than the ability to move independently; it means a radical improvement to their physical, economic, and social situation. It is not just mobility, it is possibility. But how can we ensure that possibility translates into tangible opportunity and that our impact is long term and sustainable, when marginalisation and negative attitudes towards all kinds of disability still pervade in most societies? What is the role of education?

More often than not, the individuals we serve – much like those suffering from other forms of disability - are neglected and highly stigmatised, often condemned to poverty, a second lifelong disability, as they are denied access to adequate education, equal opportunities and a chance for them and their families to exit the circle of poverty. If we consider that the World Health Organisation estimates that 1 billion people worldwide suffer from some form of disability, of which 80% in developing countries, the problem is not limited to the world's largest minority group but is a reflection of a much deeper underlying societal issue. From our experience, what lies at the core of stigma is not just ignorance but a fear of the unknown, which fosters a culture of fear and exclusion. This, we believe, can only be reversed through education.

Among other measures, governments and policy makers must invest further in guaranteeing integrated education for more persons with disabilities and promote widespread educational curriculums where not only disability is explained and normalised but the concepts of tolerance, acceptance and inclusion are at the core from a young age. By doing so, diversity can become the norm and the fear that fuels stigma gradually eradicated. If we don't teach the new generation how to embrace the ever present diversity right at their doorstep, how can we possibly expect them to adapt and thrive in an uncertain and ever changing world?