

## Fact Sheet 5: Providing mobility in low-income countries: A guide for community groups and individual donors

As more people learn about the enormous need for wheelchairs in low-income countries, a growing number of community groups and individuals are seeking to provide free wheelchairs to people who cannot afford them. The experience of Motivation's staff and partners overseas has shown that many of these wheelchairs are ill-suited to the needs of wheelchair users in low-income countries. In some cases, the wheelchairs provided can cause very serious health problems.

Before any individual or community group chooses to start or support a wheelchair provision programme, they should first learn the possible problems and dangers associated with donated wheelchairs. This guide has been developed to help community groups understand common mistakes with wheelchair provision and to provide information about ways to support sustainable wheelchair services in low-income countries.



A wheelchair can cause serious long-term health problems...

### Elements of good wheelchairs

In order to provide long lasting mobility, a wheelchair must meet these four criteria:

1. **Adjustability:** The wheelchair must either be made to the measurements of the user or be easily adjusted to fit the user. It must always come with a pressure relief cushion.
2. **Suitability:** The wheelchair must be able to navigate the terrain that the wheelchair user must push through.
3. **Durability:** The wheelchair must be well made, long lasting and easily repaired. Replacement parts should be easily available.
4. **Sustainability:** The wheelchair should be provided in a way that provides wheelchairs to the community in the long term.



...or it can promote good health and independence.

## Is *any* wheelchair better than nothing?

For a small number of users, such as short-term users or patients in hospitals, any wheelchair may be better than no wheelchair. However, for most users, inappropriate wheelchairs can cause very serious health problems and often break down within just a few months. They would be better off with no wheelchair than a piece of equipment that is dangerous to their health.

The resources used to ship and deliver these inappropriate wheelchairs overseas could be better used to provide appropriate chairs that meet the needs of each individual user and establish local wheelchair services that provide mobility in the long term. Motivation believes that something appropriate and long lasting is better than “just something”.

### Providing appropriate wheelchairs

As the table below explains, donated wheelchairs will often break down quickly, injure wheelchair users and restrict the



A pile of broken donated wheelchairs in Zimbabwe. These chairs were unable to survive the conditions in a low-income country.

development of long-term wheelchair services for a community. However, if a donor or community group is aware of these problems and asks the right questions, they can ensure that the funds they provide will supply appropriate wheelchairs.

Always make sure the wheelchair provided is adjustable, suitable for the local environment, durable and provided in a sustainable way. Be sure that the wheelchair comes with a pressure relief cushion to prevent potentially fatal pressures sores.

### Problems with donated wheelchairs

<b>Adjustability</b>	Donated used wheelchairs can rarely be adjusted to fit the individual user and will usually be too small or too large, especially for children. An ill-fitting wheelchair, particularly when it is provided without a pressure relieving cushion, can cause extremely serious and potentially fatal health problems such as pressure sores, spinal curvature (scoliosis) and contractures.
<b>Suitability</b>	Most of these wheelchairs were designed for use in hospital or indoor settings in industrialised countries like the UK or the US. In low-income countries, which tend to have uneven or unpaved roads or sandy terrain, these wheelchairs will be difficult or impossible to use.
<b>Durability</b>	Donated chairs from industrialised countries tend to break easily in the harsh conditions in most low-income countries. Repairs are extremely expensive because replacement parts are usually not available locally.
<b>Sustainability</b>	A large influx of donated wheelchairs can put local wheelchair producers out of business, eliminating the long-term source of wheelchairs for that community. There is also no follow-up or support for wheelchair users after the distribution.



An appropriate wheelchair can help to improve the quality of life of a wheelchair user.

### Supporting local wheelchair services

One of the best ways to sustainably provide appropriate wheelchairs to people in low-income countries is through support for local wheelchair service centres. These facilities can produce their own wheelchairs or import low-cost, appropriate wheelchairs like Motivation’s Worldmade wheelchairs. More importantly, they provide comprehensive

wheelchair fitting services by employing staff trained to fit, assemble and adjust wheelchairs based on the lifestyle, measurements and disability of the user.

Wheelchair service centres will usually have a wheelchair fund which is used to help pay the cost of a wheelchair for people who cannot afford to purchase one. When donors support a service centre or contribute to a wheelchair fund, they are not simply providing a wheelchair to one person. They are helping to establish a system that ensures that the community has a permanent source of wheelchairs and a staff of qualified individuals to measure and assess each wheelchair user to provide a product suitable for his or her needs.

The questions below should help you to gather useful information about a wheelchair provision programme to be sure that it meets the four criteria of appropriate wheelchair provision.

### Questions to ask about a wheelchair provision programme

<b>Adjustability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can the wheelchair be adjusted to fit the user?</li> <li>• Does the wheelchair come in children’s sizes?</li> <li>• Will a person trained to fit wheelchairs assess the user’s needs and make the appropriate adjustments to the wheelchair?</li> <li>• Does the wheelchair come with a pressure relieving cushion?</li> <li>• Is it possible for the user to push the wheelchair independently?</li> </ul>
<b>Suitability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can the wheelchair navigate uneven or unpaved surfaces?</li> <li>• Will the wheelchair user receive any training in how to use the wheelchair properly?</li> </ul>
<b>Durability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can the wheelchair handle rough conditions and constant use without breaking down?</li> <li>• Can the user find spare parts for the wheelchair locally and at reasonable cost?</li> </ul>
<b>Sustainability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will the wheelchair be provided through a permanent wheelchair service facility that provides fitting, maintenance and follow-up?</li> <li>• Will the wheelchair be delivered in a community where it might harm the business of a local wheelchair producer?</li> </ul>

## Ways to support Motivation and our partner organisations:

### 1. Sponsor a wheelchair service centre

Sponsoring a wheelchair service centre provides a community with a long-term source of wheelchairs and qualified staff trained to fit, assemble and adjust wheelchairs that meet the needs of each user's disability and lifestyle.



A trained technician in Sri Lanka assembles a Worldmade chair.

**Cost:** £10,000 per year + wheelchair fund

### 2. Contribute to a wheelchair fund

These funds provide wheelchair service centres with a pool of money used to produce locally made wheelchairs or to purchase Worldmade wheelchairs. These chairs are then supplied to people who cannot afford to purchase one themselves.



Wheelchair users in South Africa using Worldmade wheelchairs.

**Cost:** £100-120 per wheelchair

### 3. Sponsor a student at TATCOT

Your funds would be used to provide a scholarship to a student pursuing the certificate course in professional wheelchair technology at the Tanzanian Training Centre for Orthopaedic Technologists (TATCOT) in Moshi, Tanzania. Graduates are able to build and prescribe appropriate wheelchairs and manage a self-financing workshop.



Five TATCOT graduates with wheelchairs they produced as part of the course.

**Cost:** £5,000

### 4. Support Motivation's general fund

An ideal option for an organisation that wants its donation to benefit a wide array of Motivation programmes is to support the general fund. The donation would be used to improve the quality of life of wheelchair users and people with mobility disabilities in low-income countries.



A wheelchair user in Tanzania demonstrates how to do a wheelie.

**Cost:** Any amount

For more information about ways to support Motivation and our partners, please contact us at:

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