

Poverty and blindness: A survey of the literature

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report compiles findings on the impact of visual impairment on poverty. It focuses on evidence from developing countries, and includes studies that have looked specifically at visual impairment and cross-disability studies where the sample includes a significant number of people with visual disabilities. Multiple dimensions of poverty at individual and household level are considered, related to material aspects (the poverty line, employment, income, costs, debt, land, consumption and housing); services (education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation or development assistance); and social or psychological elements of poverty (self-esteem and stigma, social contact, marriage, violence, and voice and authority). Findings on the public economic costs of visual impairment and disability at community, national and global level are also included.

The review suggests that visual impairment affects multiple dimensions of poverty. Specifically, the studies included in this survey indicate that:

Poverty

- Poor people themselves see disability as a key cause of poverty and describe people with disabilities as among the most excluded 'poorest of the poor'.
- Individuals and households affected by disability are more likely to be below the poverty line, and disability increases the risk of becoming poor.

Employment

- Disability often leads to loss of employment, change to a less rewarding occupation, or reduced productivity.
- People with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed, and tend to have lower salaries.
- Among people with disabilities, those with visual impairments are most likely to be unemployed, and women are more likely to be jobless.
- Restoring sight often enables people to resume work.
- Disability of one household member limits employment for other relatives, particularly women, through time needed for assistance.
- Restoration of sight can reverse this pattern and enable other family members to find work.

Material wealth

- Average income is significantly lower for households affected by disability, and there is some suggestion that income loss is most severe in the case of visual impairment.
- Households affected by disability face considerable additional direct costs, for example, medical expenses and assistive devices.
- As a result of the loss of income and increased costs, households affected by disability often have lower savings and higher debts, and lower levels of land and asset ownership.
- Households affected by disability are more likely to suffer from hunger and food insecurity.

- People with disabilities tend to have a lower standard of housing and related amenities.

Education

- Children with disabilities are less likely to enter, remain in and succeed in school, and literacy levels are lower among people with disabilities.
- Disability has a greater impact on school participation than gender, rural/urban residence, or household economic status.
- Levels of school participation and literacy are lower among girls and women with disabilities.
- Access to education is particularly limited for people with sensory disabilities (including visual impairment).
- Disability can limit education indirectly, as the responsibility of assisting disabled family members often falls on school-age children.
- Vocational training for people with disabilities does not meet demand, and may be limited to a few low-profile occupations.

Health

- People with disabilities encounter numerous barriers to healthcare, and access to services for rehabilitation and assistive devices is particularly limited.
- Children and adults with visual disabilities have greater risk of accidents and higher mortality rates.
- Intervention to reverse blindness or provide rehabilitation can lower the risk of mortality.
- People with disabilities are at equal or increased risk of exposure to HIV and are often excluded from HIV/AIDS outreach and treatment services.

Poverty alleviation and development assistance

- People with disabilities have more limited access to development assistance and poverty relief.
- There is some indication that exclusion from these schemes is particularly severe for people with visual impairments.

Social wellbeing

- People with disabilities, and their families, experience low self-esteem and social stigma, often linked to capacity to contribute to the household and community.
- People with disabilities are often socially isolated due to community attitudes, institutional segregation and physical barriers.
- Intervention to reverse blindness can restore social contacts.
- People with disabilities (and their siblings) have reduced marriage prospects, with less choice of partner, higher dowries and a lower bride price, and greater risk of abandonment.
- People with disabilities, particularly women, encounter higher rates of violence and are less able to seek assistance in the case of abuse.
- People with disabilities have more limited decision-making power, both within and outside the household.
- Restoration of sight can restore social authority.

Public cost

- Blindness has a significant public cost, both directly in terms of medical and

- related expenses, and indirectly through missed income-earning opportunities and the long-term impact on productive potential.
- Estimates of the cost vary, but all indicate substantial sums. For example, 5.5% of productivity may be lost at community level due to disability, and visual impairment could lead to costs of 0.5% of GDP in Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia by 2020.
 - Interventions to eliminate avoidable blindness are cost-effective, with one estimate of an internal rate of return of 20%.

The different aspects of poverty detailed above are closely interlinked. For example, education can affect employment prospects, income and social status. Characteristics such as gender and urban or rural location influence the impact of disability on poverty.