

**Andrea Müller**

**Self-Organization, Skills and Agency of Visually Impaired Persons in Cameroon Considering Inappropriate Rehabilitation Programs and the Absence of State Support**

With the emergence of the disability rights movement there was a growing concern to integrate disability issues into the development agendas of different northern countries. In the 1970s, the World Health Organization developed a new rehabilitation program called Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR). The aim was to improve rehabilitation services in developing countries. Apart from this there were various non-governmental organizations and mission stations which started to develop programs for persons with disabilities (PWD) in the global South.

In a fieldtrip to Cameroon in 2012, which I did for my Master's Thesis, I tried to analyze the consequences of rehabilitation programs on the daily lives of visually impaired persons in a rural and in an urban area. I tried to question critically to what extent the programs were adapted to the skills, to the local knowledge and to the needs of the visually impaired persons. In doing so I studied the consequences on their socio-economic situation, integration and participation before and after they joined a rehabilitation program.

The findings show that the programs are not adapted to the local understandings of disability and that western ideas are predominant. Local needs usually look quite different and western ideas are often based on a perspective of pity and care. The inadequate rehabilitation programs and the absence of state support in the local context leads to the emergence of political, economic and social strategies.

The feminist scientist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2012) states that a disability can be a resource for a society. There is need to change the perspective. The anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000) also tries to strengthen the different perception of an environment through PWD and that they have their own skills. These perspectives should be integrated into the development agendas in general and into programs of institutions providing rehabilitation services in the global South. On the basis of the concept of agency from the feminist anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner (2007) it can be shown that PWD develop their own strategies, organize themselves in Disabled People's Organizations (DPO) and design community projects which cover their own needs.

In my presentation I want to show that development models for PWD in the global South should be aware of their skills and their agency should try to avoid inappropriate programs which deteriorate their life situations instead to improve them. Rehabilitation programs must consider the living conditions of PWD and not only take the rehabilitation of the body into account. There is no need for a northern development ideology which is based on a perspective of pity and only on western ideas. The context with the local understandings and needs has to be taken seriously. An ethnographic approach can help to shed light on this local context.