“In the darkest period of my life it was a disability allowance of SLR 3000 per month from the Department of Social Services that was a pillar of support for our family,” says K M Raja with a wistful look in his eyes. The farm injury the 51-year-old Sri Lankan suffered in 1997 left his lower limbs paralysed, jeopardising his agri-business and the future of his three small children.

Luckily, he found support. As Raja got over his trauma, local health authorities provided a financial loan of SLR 40 000 to restart his agri-business, as well as a motorized tricycle that gave him the freedom to reach nearby village markets. Wellawaya, where Raja resides, is Asia’s first ‘Disability and Age-friendly’ city, and is part of a WHO Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities.

“We are Sri Lanka’s second largest district, as well as being one of the poorest,” says Dr P D E Adhikari, Regional Director of Health Services in Moneragala, Wellawaya, adding, “Since farming is the main occupation of people, farm and forest-injuries are common.”

According to U S Abeykoon, a Social Development Assistant in Sri Lanka’s Department of Social Services, the community has a major role to play in managing disability. “Our job is to help the disabled get access to employment and business opportunities. Community assistance goes a long way in rehabilitating and opening up new opportunities for the disabled,” he says.
Together with his colleagues, Abeykoon facilitated B P Nimalsingho, 50, to access government assistance and set up a hairdressing salon by the highway. The polio-affected Nimalsingho had previously been employed in a sugarcane-crushing unit. After taking a skill development program run by the Age-Disability Project he developed his potential as a hairdresser and set up shop. The project provided the salon’s premises, its tool-kit and start-up financial assistance of SLR 35 000.

“I am happy for all the help I have received and very grateful to the Department for making me independent. Without the help I would still be working at the sugar-mill,” he says with a smile, not forgetting to add that his two children have received their polio drops.

Sri Lanka’s new National Action Plan for Disability (NAPD), which was drafted with WHO support, will build on these successes. “At its foundation, the situation of people with disabilities and their families, their rights and needs has been central to the formulation of the 2013 draft,” says Dr Nishirani L J Dissanayake, WHO’s National Programme Officer for Non-Communicable Diseases.

The NAPD draft has included, for the first time, a thematic area on ‘empowerment’ to enable the disabled to prepare and organize themselves to enjoy the benefits of inclusion, participation and representation. “Each thematic area has its own focus areas,” says Dr Dissanayake, explaining that there is no hierarchy in the arrangement of thematic areas or of focus areas within them, and that all need to be viewed and applied in a holistic manner.

According to Dr Jacob Kumaresan, WHO Country Representative to Sri Lanka, this interconnected, non-hierarchical approach reflects wider concern for disability rights. “Across the United Nations and its agencies, disability and the rights of the disabled have become a veritable movement. We have witnessed a paradigm shift here,” he says.

It is this transformational policy focus coupled with a change in mind-sets that has allowed disabled men like K M Raja and Nimalsingho to lead new and productive lives.