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NARRATIVE REVIEW

Beyond Functionality: The Multidimensional Impact of Assistive Technology on Individuals, Families, and Societies

Prof. (Dr.) Suman Badhal[1*], Mr. Arvind Vashist[1], Dr. Ravinder Singh[2]

[1]Department of PMR, VMMC & SJH, New Delhi,
[2]ICMR (HQ), New Delhi

[*]drsuman_badhal@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Assistive technology (AT) is key to the creation of an inclusive approach to rehabilitation. AT is more than functional rehabilitation because it encourages personal interaction, self-reliance, and inclusion in the society by those who are functionally impaired. In spite of the global demand, which is over 2.5 billion people, a small percentage, only one out of every 10 people can access the required assistive products. The current literature review is an in-depth analysis of the impacts of AT on some levels, such as individual, familial, societal, and national, embedded in the prism of health, inclusivity, fairness, and the development of capabilities. This discussion analyses the importance of Bridge-the-gap Assistive Technology (AT) in functional impairments, lessening the caregiver burden, fostering inclusiveness, and ensuring further innovation and policy-coherence through the lens of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) by the World Health Organisation and the Capability Approach by Sen. The perspectives outlined in the global policies, as well as in the public health, and rehabilitation, are the insights that help to realize that AT does not just improve functional outcomes but transforms the quality of life, economic productivity, and social cohesion. The future path is that assistive technologies with or without AI need to be integrated into the model of rehabilitation, enhance the service delivery in the context of resource-scarce environments, and consider the role of the assistive technology in the scope of universal health coverage. AT must be recognized as a mediator of personal potential and social justice, without which the achievement of bias-free and person-centered rehabilitation practices at the global level is impossible.

Keywords: Assistive Technology, Impact of Assistive Technology, Accessibility, Rehabilitation.

1. Introduction

Assistive technology (AT) is a much-needed component of contemporary rehabilitation which entails devices, tools, and systems intended to increase the level of functionality of persons with disabilities or age limitations[1]. Assistive products (APs) have become highly active agents of independence, participation, and inclusion much more so than compensation tools[1]. In its Global Report on Assistive Technology (GReAT), World Health Organisation (WHO) and UNICEF proposed that over 2.5 billion people should need AT by 2030, and only one in ten currently does so[1]. The magnitude of unmet needs measure of structural inequalities, resource inadequacies, and social blockage to the realisation of the full transformational capacity of the assistive technology.

One problem that causes and is caused by health inequity in the world is functional impairment. The 2019 Global Burden of Disease Study has also found out that 2.4 billion individuals face the functional impairments that demand rehabilitation interventions[2]. Assistive Technology (AT) can also help much to decrease this burden since it allows functional recovery and enhances social interaction when built into models of rehabilitation. Based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) framework of the WHO, this review focuses on the multidimensional effect of assistive technology (AT) on well-being, including the psychological, social and economic aspects beyond the functional outcomes[3]. Nevertheless, inequalities in access still exist especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), which is partially because of the lack of funding, frailty of service schemes, and inadequate policy execution[4].

2. Aim and Scope

The scope of the literature review is to give a detailed, this review surpasses simple listing of clinical outcomes to appreciate AT as a process of social justice and human development by merging conceptual frameworks into AT, i.e. the WHO ICF framework [3] and the Capability Approach by Sen[5], with empirical evidence.

Theoretically-based examination of the multidimensional effects of assistive technology (AT) on people with functional impairments, their families, and the larger society. In particular, it aims to: (1) investigate the individual level of functional, psychological, and social benefits of AT in several major areas such as mobility, vision, hearing, cognition, communication and self-care; (2) analyse the family and societal effects of AT, such as the decrease in caregiver-burden, social inclusion; (3) explore the economic and policy implication of scaled AT provision in rehabilitation systems and universal health coverage models; and (4) identify the long-term barriers to equitable access to AT and suggest evidence-based recommendations on future innovation, policy integration[6,7].

The peer-reviewed literature, international policy documents, and global health reports that were considered the field of this review. The selection of the studies was determined according to their pertinence to the AT provision, measurement of the impact, equity and the outcome of rehabilitation in a variety of geographic and economical settings. Quantitative data and qualitative data are taken into consideration, and they demonstrate the scope of domains, where AT has significant impacts, including functional, psychosocial, cultural, and economic ones. The review is based on synthesising patterns of evidence to provide information on the rehabilitation policy, practice, and research priorities at a global basis without appraising particular clinical trials of individual devices[8,9,10]. Out of scope are purely biomedical device efficacy studies, which lack a rehabilitation or social participation aspect and technologies that are mostly aimed at non-disabled users, but can potentially benefit persons with disabilities.

3. Conceptual Framework: Functioning, Capability and Equity

3.1 THE ICF MODEL OF FUNCTIONING AND PARTICIPATION

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) framework recognizes health problems, individual factors, and environmental factors as a complex interaction of functional impairment concept[3]. AT is a support system, and it is outside the body and it alleviates the blockage to activities and social participation. AT will assist to make sure that the consequences of rehabilitation and communal interaction are included by

facilitating the availability of education, employment, communication, and self-care.

The ICF model focuses on the reality that the success of rehabilitation is not only pegged on clinical recovery but it also encompasses the elements of independence, inclusion and quality of life. In such a way, AT is between impairment and full participation, between the health services and the broader purposes of the human rights and social attachments. Remarkably, it has validated that the environmental determinants, including AT which is one of the prime examples, play a determinant role in the experience of disability and success of rehabilitation in the ICF model[11].

3.2 THE CAPABILITY APPROACH

The Development as Freedom by Amartya Sen puts development into a new perspective as the furtherance of the real freedoms of people to have the life they appreciate[5]. AT has served in this model to achieve latent talents in performance that is realised[6]. Assistive technology makes disabled persons stronger due to their functional impairment as it enables them to turn their resources such as technology aids and rehabilitation services to an opportunity that will enable them to participate and be independent.

The idea of functional impairment has also been applied to underline the fact that impairment is not necessarily a restriction of capacity but more so it is the interaction between the impairment and the environmental restriction that puts it in a restrictive position[6]. These barriers can be countered through the utilization of AT that converts constraints into opportunities so that people with functional impairments can be in communication with desirable states of wellbeing. The extension of the Capability Approach presented by Nussbaum also holds the view that the use of technology is essential in maintaining the dignity and complete human flourishing of individuals with disabilities[12]. The capability perspective does not view AT as a compensation mechanism but as an enabling mechanism that enhances the freedom, agency and dignity of people.

3.3 POLICY AND RIGHTS-BASED PERSPECTIVES

Policy wise, AT reflects the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) that treats mobile aids and technologies as a human right [13]. It has been suggested that the AT strategies should not be confined to the procurement but should be inclusive in design, good delivery and good governance set ups[8]. Assistive technology overlaps with universal design and universal health across the world which makes it an extremely significant issue of sustainable development[9]. All these standards introduce the complex aspect of the effects of assistive technology in the clinical, social, economic, and ethical realms that demands a detailed analysis.

4. Tangible Impacts of Assistive Technology

4.1 INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL IMPACTS

Assistive Technologies (AT) enhances the physical access, sensory accessibility and cognitive support enabling the individuals to participate in everyday and societal practices[1,14,15,16]. Devices that restore functionality and independence are prostheses, hearing aids, screen readers, and cognitive aids among others. The WHO identifies seven general categories of assistive technologies that include mobility, visual, hearing, cognitive, communication, self-care and recreation and it is all related to the quantifiable enhancement of independence and well-being[1]. Another longitudinal study by Agree[17] also showed that use of AT among the older adults is linked with long-term functional limitation decrease, especially when the devices are personalized to the needs of the users.

4.2 FAMILY-LEVEL IMPACTS

AT will lower the physical and emotional cost to the caregiver since it improves user autonomy[1,18]. The autonomy of the loved ones leads to the decline in the amount of time required to help the family and the development of emotional well-being of the families. The effective application of Assistive Technology (AT) has been demonstrated to enhance the family relations and incorporation into the society to shift the paradigm caregiver to cooperation[19].

On the financial level, AT assists the families to have a stable life by eradicating the costs of obtaining professional care [14]. This may be redistribution of time and resources to more productive activities which may eventually enhance the common good since the increasing autonomy of the people in a family unit. A cost-modelling study was able to establish that powered wheelchair users exhibited significantly lower

requirements of personal attendant care hours, which translated to huge long term cost savings of families and of the health system at large[20].

4.3 SOCIETAL AND NATIONAL IMPACTS

Assistive Technology at the social level results to inclusion, productivity, and innovation. It is known that the right to AT is not only confined to the personal good, but also to the entire society[21]. The involvement of the functional impaired person in the job market is enhanced in cases where there exist a good AT that is capable of enhancing the GDP and reducing dependency on welfare[1,9]. The massive returns of investments through the reduction of the long-term healthcare costs are also being delivered by policy frameworks that incorporate AT in the public health and education systems[8].

The AT complies with international requirements, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). AT has been established to directly affect SDG 3 (health), SDG 4 (education), SDG 8 (decent work), and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities)[22]. In addition, inclusive AT policies not only improve living standards of a country in the sense that it conforms to the UNCRPD, but also in the sense that it enjoys positive international reputation of being a fair society[13]. It was emphasized that countries investing in AT in their rehabilitation systems are always associated with improved disability-adjusted life year (DALY) and reduced costs of social welfare in the long run[23].

5. Intangible Impacts: Beyond Physical Function

The overall perception of the real-life advantages of Assistive Technology (AT) is present, yet intimate effects of Assistive Technology have serious intangible consequences on psychological, emotional, and social dimensions as well. Studies have established that AT is equally instrumental in promoting self-confidence, self-confidence and a sense of belonging to a community among others in which the devices are more relevant in that specific[18]. Such psychosocial impacts of AT are identity building, empowerment, and reducing stigma.

5.1 PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AND EMPOWERMENT

AT has been described as a psychosocial coping strategy to reinstate dignity and control[19]. The process of assistive Technology (AT) acquisition has also been known to bring about increased self-efficacy and optimism in users and consequently brings about better mental health. Research has determined that user-involvement in the design of digital AT results in increasing this perceived usability and emotional satisfaction, and the emergence of a feeling of autonomy and trust in technological devices[18]. The Matching Person and Technology (MPT) model by Scherer specifically states psychological fit between user and device to be a major predictor of AT adoption and long-term use[19].

5.2 SOCIAL INCLUSION AND REDUCTION OF STIGMA

AT enables the participative role in the community, it educates and it works, relief of the symptoms of social isolation[1,9,18]. In the long run, the social stigmas in the society are broken by the normalisation of the use of AT resulting in a culture of inclusion[18]. The greater availability gives rise to the community building through the formation of the acceptance of the diversity which causes the reciprocation of power and the inclusion of the relationships. It was evidenced that visible assistive devices may invite social interaction, as well as repel it, and inclusive design that normalises AT in the mainstream product aesthetics can reduce the perceived stigma by a significant margin[24].

5.3 CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION

At a broader cultural level, the presence of the AT suggests the shift of charity to the rights-based disability practices[8,13]. The narratives of empowerment and not dependency is backed by the government and the community through investment in assistive technology (AT). The shift of culture also contributes towards the incorporation of the idea of functional impairment into the mainstream discourse of productivity, innovation, and civic involvement[22].

6. Domain-Specific Impacts of Assistive Technology

6.1 MOBILITY AND LOCOMOTOR FUNCTION

Wheelchairs, prosthetics and walkers are some of the most evident categories of AT[1]. Their benefits are not confined to locomotion only but make education, work and social contacts easier. The WHO dwells upon the fact that mobility aids help

to promote individual autonomy and human rights[25]. Properly fitting and properly serviced devices reduce other complications like muscle pain, prevent other associated conditions and increase involvement[3,15]. Some systematic reviews established the fact that powered mobility devices pointlessly enhance the quality of life and social participation among people with severe mobility problems[26].

6.2 VISION

Information and communication can be accessed by visual ATs with embedded screen readers, Braille display and AI assisted navigation[1,18]. The usability and digital accessibility have been established to be of great importance in ensuring the success of these devices[18]. The more autonomy the visually impaired have, the higher the performance in education and the level of employment[9]. Recent findings of research stress the fact that low-vision rehabilitation with optical AT and systematic training lead to significantly larger increases in reading speed and daily task execution than the provision of devices only[27].

6.3 HEARING

Communication and learning are improved by the use of hearing aids, cochlear implants, and captioning systems[1,15]. They also mitigate the social alienation in case they are integrated into the community health systems[8,22]. The relationships with the rest of the world will improve as the auditory deficiencies will be removed by the assistive technology, and the impact of the isolation on the psychological crisis will be mitigated. It was discovered that untreated hearing loss is strongly linked with the faster cognitive decline and depression among older adults, which supports the paramount significance of early hearing AT in terms of the healthcare of a population[28].

6.4 COGNITIVE AND COMMUNICATION AIDS

Memory applications and speech-generating devices are used with the assistance of cognitive impairments and people with communication impairments[1,19]. The technological changes promote participation in learning processes and self-care besides enabling individuals to express themselves. In order to make sure that technology is relevant among the users, it is suggested to employ large models of evaluation, which implies emotional and cognitive modifications[19]. Empirical evidence on Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) studies has reported that speech-generating technologies have a significant impact on communication inclusion of those with severe speech impairment that allows them to participate effectively in education and employment[29].

6.5 SELF-CARE AND DAILY LIVING

Self-care AT with the use of adaptive utensils, dressing aids, and environmental control systems increases the autonomy of activities of daily living[1,3]. The technologies play a pivotal role in enhancing independence of elderly individuals and individuals with functional impairments and decreasing their dependency on caregivers as well as boosting their dignity and well-being[19].

6.6 SPORTS, RECREATION, AND LEISURE

AT sporting devices and recreational devices enhance social belonging and well-being[1]. Adaptive technology in sports activity increases level of confidence, stigmas, physical and mental health. The evidence provided was the result of longitudinal studies, which showed that the involvement in adaptive sports was connected with a significant improvement of the self-concept, life satisfaction, and community integration among individuals with physical impairments[30]. The domains demonstrate how the assistive technology can be applicable to enable functional rehabilitation, and general participation in the daily activities.

7. Integrated Comparison of Reported Impacts

The study in this paper is a synthesis of the results of the World Health Organisation in its Global Report on Assistive Technology alongside the pertinent scholarly sources alongside the qualitative exposition of the psychosocial and cultural implication, to unite the results of both empirical research and personal experience. Several similar themes of positive effects were identified in both of the data sources and comprise such aspects as enhanced mobility, enhanced communication, additive independence, decreased caregiver pressure and augmented social inclusion and augmented economic engagement. Moreover, the overall awareness of such outcomes as emotional comfort, inculcated hope, improved social relationships, and enhanced national image is also the consequence of these studies. These discoveries are concorded and supplemented in isolation, family, society and nationally as presented in the following table.

Table 1. Integrated Comparison of Impacts of Assistive Technology

Level/Domain	Tangible Impacts	Intangible Impacts
Person	**Mobility/Locomotor:** Improved mobility and independence; fewer secondary complications. **Vision:** Access to education/work through Braille and screen-readers. **Hearing:** Improved communication and learning via hearing aids/cochlear implants. **Cognition:** Enhanced task management through memory aids and cognitive apps. **Communication:** Participation and learning through AAC devices. **Self-care:** Greater autonomy with adaptive utensils, dressing aids. **Recreation/Sport:** Participation in adaptive sports, improved health.	Confidence, self-esteem, optimism; reduced isolation and frustration; greater self-expression and dignity.
Family	Reduced caregiver time and financial burden; improved household productivity.	Emotional relief; stronger family cohesion and sense of pride.
Society	Increased workforce inclusion and productivity; reduced healthcare costs.	Greater social cohesion, reduced stigma, cultural shift toward inclusion.
Country/Policy	Economic growth; compliance with UNCRPD and SDGs; innovation in local manufacturing.	Enhanced national image, leadership in inclusive innovation.

8. Barriers and Gaps to AT Access

Despite the accepted importance of assistive technology (AT) at the scale of large magnitude, the process of creation of universal access is impeded with major barriers that are founded on various economical, structural, social and technological aspects.

8.1 ECONOMIC AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Cost is also a major challenge particularly in LMICs[14,4]. Other groups of reviews have observed that cost and logistical factors are limiting the number of people accessing assistive technology due to its cost[14]. Absence of global mechanisms that can ensure access and availability has been pointed out[15]. Unfair distributions are hindered by poor financial systems, absence of reimbursement systems and fragmented service delivery systems. It was discovered that in the sub-Saharan Africa, one in five people in need of a wheelchair had one of the right machines, which goes to illustrate the extent of the hidden structural divide in LMICs[31].

8.2 HUMAN RESOURCE AND INFRASTRUCTURE LIMITATIONS

Assistive technology provisions demand skilled manpower, i.e. rehabilitation scientists, therapists, and technicians, which are not necessarily available in low resource settings[4,15]. It was revealed that one of the causes of devices abandonment and misuse is also poor technical capacities and infrastructures[14]. There is a need to enhance the workforce training and retention systems so that there can be sustainable assistive technology services.

8.3 AWARENESS, ACCEPTABILITY AND CULTURAL FACTORS.

The AT Stigma and misinformation continue to exist in the majority of societies[13]. The consumers could not accept AT due to the culture or design differences with the local cultures[18]. Participatory design should be highlighted to ensure the adaptation of devices to the priorities of the users and their cultures, which leads to an increase in the level of acceptance and compliance in the end[9].

8.4 DATA, RESEARCH, AND POLICY GAPS.

Reliable information on the coverage, quality and impact of assistive technology has had gaps that have hampered the process of policy formulation[8,21]. Evidence-based policy and standard outcome measure are mentioned in the Global Strategy of People-Centered and Integrated Health Services 2021-2030 of the WHO[32,33]. The progress towards universal access cannot be traced efficiently without data systems that will monitor and track the AT provision and performance.

9. Future Directions: Innovation, AI, and Policy Integration

9.1 DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND SMART ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES

The concept of assistive technology has been growing through the incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), and data analytics[34]. The AI-assisted technology is considered one of the leading advances in customization, flexibility, and creation[32]. Accuracy and independence can be developed with the assistance of artificial intelligence technologies such as smart prosthetics, AI-based cognitive aids with predictive features and communication tools, which will aid in personalized rehabilitation. Applications of AI in rehabilitation are adaptive interfaces, robotic exoskeletons, neuro-prosthetics[33]. Vitally, studies are warning researchers that AI-enabled AT systems should undergo validation in different groups of users to eliminate the possibility of reinforcing algorithmic bias at the disadvantage of the underrepresented disability groups[35].

However, there exist also ethical concerns of privacy, data security, and algorithmic bias with digital AT[34]. Design equity requires sharing systems where the users are involved in the design and testing of design[32].

9.2 LOCAL PRODUCTION AND FRUGAL INNOVATION

To alleviate the issue of affordability and contextual irrelevance, on-site production with low-cost materials and 3D printing has been promoted, on-site printing with cheap materials and 3D printing has been encouraged to address the problem of affordability and contextual irrelevancy[14]. Innovations stimulated by low and middle-income countries (LMICs) increase the trust on imports, venture business, and enhanced sustainability by enabling them to produce at the community level and offer tailored solutions in order to meet the needs of the locals. Successful community-based AT fabrication programs had been recorded by scientists in South Asia which developed contextually adapted and significantly cheaper devices than imported ones[36].

9.3 POLICY INTEGRATION AND GLOBAL COOPERATION

The GATE Initiative provides a roadmap of integrating AT in health and social systems and concentrates on four pillars, such as products, provision, personnel, and policy. The inclusion of AT in Universal Health Coverage (UHC) will not make access a privilege but a right[1,8,32]. The policy frameworks are also capable of aligning the standards of the various sectors, which constitutes an interconnection of health, education, and social protection[33].

This heightened advocacy is in the importance of having users, practitioners, and policymakers in collaborative projects to develop assistive technology ecosystems[8,18]. The regulatory structures should be further enhanced, the procurement transparency should be more demanding, and the reimbursement plans should be enhanced to expedite development of equitable access.

9.4 EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

One of the strengths in exercising AT systems is capacity building. Integrated training programs which include clinical, engineering and psychosocial components of assessment of AT have been proposed[19]. The policies proposed by the World Health Organisation suggest to invest in interdisciplinary training to attain skilled professionals who could oversee the Assistive Technology in its life cycle that would involve assessment, installation, follow-up, and evaluation[33].

9.5 AT AS A DRIVER OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

AT has been made central to the achievement of SDGs that makes it to be associated with reduction of poverty, education and gender equality[9,22]. Assistive Technology (AT) does not just assist in the process of regaining functionality but also enhances productivity that leads to overall economic development. AT integration in the paradigm of sustainable development promotes resiliency and integrative practices.

10. Conclusion

Assistive technology in the practice of rehabilitation is an innovative move in convergence that combines the medical, social and technological perspectives. Through an amalgamation of the international models and empirical research work, this discussion has pointed out that the effects of assistive technology were not solely that of physical functionality but also they extended to include

psychological wellbeing, inclusion in the society and economic self-sufficiency.

Assistive Technology (AT) expands the field of potential activities, individuals, and transforms disabilities into opportunities, on the one hand, within the context of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) and the Capability Approach. Its impacts not only touch on the individual world, but also on families, communities, and societies with the meaning that the significance of AT does not only serve as a degree of supplementing the rehabilitation process, but it is also an essential part of a fair social development and sustainable growth. Nonetheless, there exist profound inequalities. The AT access is primarily geographic and income-based. Systemic barriers which hinder the equitable distribution include affordability, policy integration and human resource shortage. To bridge this gap, there is a need to work together at the international level as spearheaded by the WHO GATE Initiative and Global Strategy on People-Centred and Integrated Health Services.

As the atmosphere of artificial intelligence and changes in the digital rehabilitation environment becomes more progressive, ethical values, participation, and equity should be encouraged to facilitate efficient and inclusive implementation of new solutions. Inclusion of Assistive Technology (AT) into the context of broad-based healthcare coverage and community-based rehabilitation paradigm is a potential source of development, which balances the development of technology with the need to be human and integrated with the community. Lastly, the AT ideology should be re-conceptualized as an activator of the human potential, and not a purely remedial instrument that summarizes the key concepts of individual-centered rehabilitation that enhances functionality, dignity and societal involvement at the universal level. International commitment to the assistive technology development reflects the investment in the quality of human being.

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ORCID ID:

Prof. (Dr.) Suman Badhal: 0000-0002-0345-5225
Mr. Arvind Vashist: 0009-0000-4717-0056
Dr. Ravinder Singh: 0000-0002-9970-415X

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