



A Role Playing Exercise of a Wheelchair Program in Central America

# Wheelchairs for the World

Written by Amy Smith

In this role play, students experience some of the tensions that arise when stakeholders with varying objectives determine the outcome of a project. They gain insight into the factors that influence funding decisions and the different effects of donation-based programs and capacity-building programs.

Start by having students playing the same character get together as they read through their roles. Check in with each group to make sure they understand their objectives and their special instructions. It is critical that you emphasize that the characters who are only supposed to respond to direct questions do this consistently (and without saying things like “I’m only allowed to respond to direct questions” to their class-mates). After about 5 minutes have the working groups form and begin the exercise. Martin(a) Moneybags will run the meeting. You should set a time limit, 15 minutes is about right, although you can adjust this depending on what time you have available, but be sure to leave plenty of time for the discussion that follows. At the end of the time, ask each Martin(a) Moneybags to make their decision and write it on a piece of paper and turn it in. Then give them the opportunity to explain their decisions to the class. Following this, ask the class what they thought of their participation in the decision-making process. You may also want to use this as an opportunity to bring up other examples of donation-based programs vs capacity-building programs and their consequences.

## Additional comments:

The wheelchair users and their parents are only allowed to respond to direct questions. In many cases, they are not given the opportunity to do anything other than introduce themselves at the beginning of the meeting. It is interesting that in many cases the entire plan is set without ever asking the end user (the wheelchair rider) what they would like. Sadly, this is also typical of many development projects.

I have run the exercise where in half the cases, Max(ine) the mechanic is able to communicate freely and in the other half, (s)he is only allowed to respond to direct questions. This limits the ability of the workshop manager to explain the benefits of capacity building and employment generation to the funders. It is interesting to note how this affects the decisions that are made.

When they are not given specific instructions, different students playing Martin(a) Moneybags will interpret their task in a variety of ways, some will give some money to each program, to hedge their bets, others will distribute it in an all-or-nothing manner. The directions in the role descriptions are ambiguous, so you should decide if you want to restrict their options.



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After reading these instructions, you will get together with the other people who have been assigned your role to discuss it and make sure everything is clear to you. After this, you will join a group of the other players in this exercise. Your role is listed below:



## ***Paraleptic Wheelchair Rider:***

Simon(a) Silla-de-Ruedas

You are participating, as the character described below, in a meeting with a visitor from the United States, Martin Moneybags. Stay in character and follow the special instructions below.

You are an 18-year-old bus-accident victim with a spinal cord injury that has left you a paraplegic. Your family is very poor and your medical care was only possible through an international health organization. You had completed primary school before your accident, but since then, your time has been spent in the hospital recovering and after that, in a room at your family's house because you have no way to get around. An organization in your country has offered you vocational training, but you need to commute two miles over rough, unpaved and sandy roads to get to and from the classes every day. Without this training you will never be able to find a job and support yourself, so a wheelchair is vital to your hope of being reintegrated into society. You have no income yourself, so you have absolutely no money to pay for a chair.

During your time in the hospital, you witnessed many disabled people who returned to the hospital for treatment of pressure sores and other potentially fatal complications of inappropriate or poorly fitting chairs. Since your accident, you are keenly aware of every wheelchair and every disabled person you see. You have lost count of all of the old broken wheelchairs you have seen because they were not built to withstand the rough terrain of your country. And now the riders who rode those chairs are back to dragging themselves along on the ground, if they get out at all. You know that you could never make it even 100 yards outside of your house in one of those chairs that was built for pushing grandmothers around on the smooth linoleum floor of a hospital.

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## **Local Wheelchair Fabricator:**

Max(ine) Mechanic

You are participating, as the character described below, in a meeting with a visitor from the United States, Martin Moneybags. Stay in character throughout this exercise.

You are an experienced metalworker in Central America who has been relatively successful in the industry. Your son was afflicted with spina bifida when he was a child, leaving him a paraplegic. When you learned of appropriate wheelchair designs meant to be built and used in developing countries, you changed your business and began building wheelchairs in your shop. Since that time you have adopted and improved a design developed by Whirlwind Wheelchair International from the U.S. and your shop now employs 10 wheelchair riders building chairs as they learn valuable skills.

Your organization is thus providing value-added economic activity, vocational training for disabled people, and wheelchairs that work well and hold up in the tough conditions they are exposed to in your country. Your workshop can turn out 30 wheelchairs per month, at a cost of \$300 per chair (materials, labor, etc.). They work 10 months a year, giving you the capacity to produce 300 chairs a year.

You know that Mr. Moneybags is somehow related to disability assistance in developing countries. However, in the past your only experience with people like him is that they import low-quality chairs and dump them on the market at very low prices. This drives the price down to a point where you cannot sell your chairs and threatens your business and the employment of your workers. The irony is that most of these donated chairs are of such low quality that within a year they are out on the street rusting away or brought into your shop to be fixed. Unfortunately, since they are manufactured abroad with different parts and methods, it would usually cost more to fix them than to build a new, higher quality chair. Your chairs will typically last at least 10 times longer under heavy use and allow a rider much more freedom of movement on the rough terrain in much of the country.



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## **Wheelchair Donation NGO Manager:**

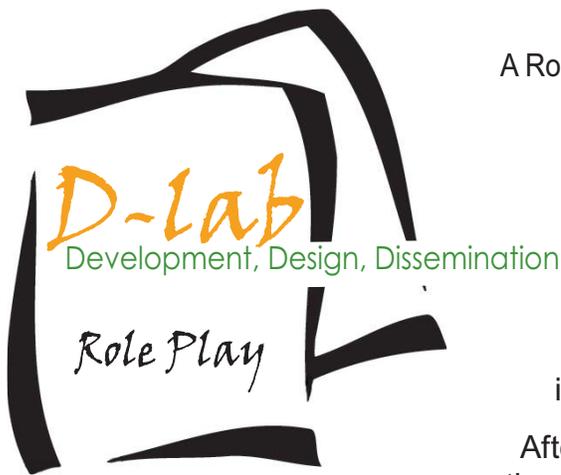
Donald (or Doreen) Do-gooder

You are a middle-manager in a global humanitarian relief non-governmental organization (NGO). You have been assigned to lead a wheelchair donation project focusing on Central America. The goal of this program is simple: deliver wheelchairs to people in Central America who need them but cannot afford them. You will be evaluated within your organization based on the number of people you serve and the time it takes you to do it. For some reason, funding for these programs seems to be hard to find lately. Your predecessor was fired two months ago for not producing results. You have been working night and day to find donors, but have thus far had no luck in securing funding for your operation. A portion of the funding you raise goes to pay the overhead, which includes your salary. If you can't get your project funded, you will lose your job.

After many dead-ends, you have managed to secure a meeting with a grants officer from a wealthy foundation that has a reputation for being generous in the cause of international disability assistance. You are aware that there will be other parties at this meeting who may be competing for the same money.

You have to make your case and convince the grants officer to fund your project, or it will not go any further. You are encouraged, however, by the hundreds of pictures of smiling recipients of chairs that have been helped by your program, taken at previous distribution events and included in past reports. From the reports you've read, mobility allows them to go to school, get vocational training, get jobs, and become participating members of the economy and society.

Your offer seems unbeatable: 1,000 brand-new Everest and Jennings wheelchairs at 10% of their cost. E&J was under contract to produce chairs to fully outfit all of the hospitals in Massachusetts. However, a production run of 1,000 chairs had an error in their painting step and the color of the frames and fabric does not match. They are offering you chairs that normally sell for \$1,000 for only \$100 a piece. Shipping to get the chairs to Central America is another \$10 per chair. Since you want the people who receive the chairs to really value them, your organization does not just give them away, but rather charges a \$50 fee per chair. You can send a lot of chairs down south for the \$100,000 this funder is offering. As you are going over the numbers, don't forget the 15% overhead your organization charges for providing this service (including paying your salary, warehousing the chairs, and paying other administrative staff, etc.).



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## **Foundation Grant Officer:**

Martina (or Martin) Moneybags

You are a grant officer for a large funding foundation. You work in the area of international disability assistance in Central America. Your organization has set aside \$100,000 for this program, and it is your responsibility to see that the money is spent wisely. Your organization expects concrete results and puts a priority on effective ways of documenting and demonstrating impact. There is pressure from above to maximize the number of wheelchairs you can report delivering to Central America during the year.

In order to make your decision, you have organized a meeting of the main stakeholders in this arena: a representative of a US-based NGO that delivers chairs to people in developing countries, a local Central American wheelchair fabricator, a young adult from Central America who needs a wheelchair but cannot afford one independently, and the parent of this young adult. The young adult is a paraplegic accident victim and lives at home with his/her parents. S/he has no income and no way of earning any, especially without a chair. His/her parent is also very poor and it would be difficult for him/her to purchase a chair for his/her child.

You have organized the meeting, so it will be your job to lead the discussion. By the end of the discussion, you must have a decision about how you will use the \$100,000 and why.

### Special Instructions:

Begin the exercise by introducing yourself to the other participants : “Hello, my name is Martin(a) Moneybags and I represent the Helping Hand Foundation.” It is your job to run the meeting in order to get the information you need to make your decision.



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## ***Parent of a Paraplegic in Central America:***

**Senor(a) Silla-de-Ruedas**

You are participating, as the character described below, in a meeting with a visitor from the United States, Martin Moneybags. Stay in character and note the special instructions below.

You are a father (or mother) of five, living in Central America. One of your sons is eighteen years old and he is a paraplegic due to a bus accident when he was younger. Up to now, he has been stuck at home because he has no form of mobility aid, such as a wheelchair. They have always been too expensive or simply unavailable. You are slowly putting away money, bit by bit, in hopes of buying him a wheelchair someday. He now has the opportunity to attend vocational training and get a job, but it's impossible unless he has a wheelchair to commute the 2 miles to the school, which is on rough roads.

Besides the wheelchair, there are numerous things that you feel you should spend your money on to provide for your family, and you certainly do not have the disposable income to just go out and buy a chair. They generally cost \$300 or more, which you simply cannot afford. You don't know much about wheelchairs yourself, but you think they must be able to make them for less. You know that Mr. Moneybags is somehow related to disability assistance and you see this as an opportunity to finally have wheelchairs available in your country.

### Special Instructions:

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