

RESPECT FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

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“A Society which is good for disabled people is a better society for all”.

(This statement was made by Dr. Lisa Kauppinen, President of the World Federation of the Deaf at the closing of the Copenhagen Summit and set the tone for this discussion on respect: advocating to eliminate social exclusion).

Defining disability is not an easy task, and it is becoming clear that no single definition can cover all disabilities. People with disabilities are generally considered to include people with physical, sensory, mental health and intellectual disabilities. Over the past century, the concept of disability has evolved significantly. For many decades, disability was seen as a set of characteristics of the individual - a person was disabled or had a disability. As such, governments' and society's interventions involved protecting the individual and the community, or treating and fixing the impairment. But in the past two decades, as the disability rights movement has emerged, the concept of disability has shifted from individual impairment to a more social phenomenon. In this social view, people with disabilities are seen as being restricted in performing daily activities because of a complex set of interrelating factors, some pertaining to the person and some pertaining to the person's immediate environment and social/political arrangements.

The social concept of disability introduces the notion that society has erected barriers, physical or attitudinal, that affect people with disabilities. In November 2001 the World Health Organization released a new framework, the International Classification of functioning, Disability and Health (ICF). This new framework goes beyond a medical approach to take a much broader view of disability. The ICF looks at the body, individual activities, social participation and social environments.

According to United Nations estimates, people with disabilities represent between 7 and 10 % of any country's population. This figure remains relatively stable except in cases where countries are affected by armed conflict or other natural or social disasters. Bengt Lindqvist, Special

Rapporteur of the UN Commission for Social Development on Disability indicated that by international standards of classification there are at least 500 million disabled people in the world and this figure is expected to rise because of several factors. If one is to widen the picture and consider that one person's disability does not only affect her/his own situation, but also the situation of her/his family and even her/his community, then these figures suggest that the number of persons directly or indirectly affected by social exclusion is considerable. Social exclusion goes hand in hand with disability.

If we are to be guided by the UN estimates it is safe to say that of a population of 7,000,000 approximately 700,000 persons with disabilities live in the English speaking Caribbean. In Trinidad and Tobago, of a population of approximately 1.3 million persons, it is reasonable to conclude that the number of persons with disabilities living in the country would be in the region of about 130,000 persons. However, the number still remains uncertain, since disability has been systematically excluded from the categories considered when conducting national and/or regional censuses.

THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF DISABILITY

It is paradoxical that while people with disabilities make up a significant part of global civilization, there is debate about the importance of understanding the relationship between poverty and disability and how advocacy might become a tool of empowerment to eliminate social exclusion of the population living in disability conditions. Poverty, disability and social exclusion are worldwide phenomena that have been present in all societies for centuries. The terms poverty, disability and social exclusion are complex, multi-dimensional and sometimes controversial. Consequently, definitions vary and there can be no debate on the issues without an understanding of how they are defined, their key characteristics, as well as understanding and recognizing the intricate relationship, which exist among them.

It is internationally recognized that persons with disabilities are disproportionately amongst the poorest of the poor in all parts of the world. There is data to show that people with disabilities in

developing countries like Trinidad and Tobago and countries of the Caribbean are usually very poor. For persons with disabilities it is more than just a monetary issue but involves the condition of "voicelessness" which has great consequences for discrimination, powerlessness and exclusion. In 2000, a Department for International Development (DFID) report revealed that the majority of persons with disabilities find that their situation affects their chances of going to school, working for a living, enjoying family life and participating as equals in social life. It was estimated that only 2% of people with disabilities in developing countries have access to rehabilitation and appropriate basic services.

Disability and Society

It may seem that there are as many interpretations of the concept of disability as there are societies. This fact suggests that there is importance in considering the cultural aspects that construct specific situations for persons with disabilities throughout the world. In the main though, disability has social, health and human rights implications and it can be defined as the social outcome of a physical or mental impairment: the impairment however, only becomes a handicap in the context of a given society, often because the society does not respect the needs and the rights of its citizens living with impairment. Disability therefore is not a natural, but a social fact. A full understanding of disability recognizes that it has a powerful human rights dimension and is often associated with social exclusion and increased exposure and vulnerability to poverty.

It is well known that there is a link between poverty and disability, which is closely related to the link between the general economic situation of a country and the living conditions of people with disabilities. In some developing countries there exists a cycle of poverty which is closely connected to high illiteracy rates, poor nutritional status, high unemployment and underemployment, low occupational mobility and limited access to vaccination programmes and health and maternity care. In essence, poor people are more likely to have poor health as well as poor living and working conditions. It is generally agreed that social exclusion is multidimensional and embedded in the social institutions in society. It arises out of

discriminatory practices of an economic and social nature. Since discriminatory practices so severely restrict access to the services and jobs needed for a minimal standard of living. It follows therefore that social exclusion does exist and one of the groups to be affected is the population with disabilities.

DISCRIMINATION AS THE ORIGIN OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Historically, people with disabilities have been the subjects of prejudice and discrimination, and suffered alienation and isolation, as well as a significantly reduced quality of life. In societies that vindicate narrow ideals of "normalcy" and "functionality", it might be considered even "natural" that persons with disabilities do not have access to social, political and economic structures, and not everybody is ready to admit that the word discrimination must be used to explain exclusion against persons with disabilities. Parallel to this, institutional discrimination builds and reinforces attitudinal discrimination and condones environmental discrimination. Such attitudes might lead those in positions of authority to justify lack of investment on the necessary measures to overcome an inaccessible environment.

STRUGGLE AGAINST DISCRIMINATION

The states of "voicelessness" and "powerlessness" are major deterrents in persons with disabilities' ability to advocate for social inclusion. People who are excluded and who are not organized will continue to be powerless in an environment which is discriminatory in the first place. We know that by virtue of their marginalization and exclusion, people with disabilities are least represented in research and at times, when they are included, they are used to legitimize the research process rather than making it a tool for self knowledge or control of their lives. Persons with disabilities may be excluded from the research planning process as well as the designing and administration of the research and the choice of the methodology to be used. Once the research has concluded, results are not always available and, if ever, format is not always accessible to all kinds of disabilities.

CONCLUSION

The road to social inclusion will be a long hard one if and only if the discriminatory attitudes that previously placed disabled people into a spiral of poverty and exclusion remain unchanged. Awareness is building globally but not rapidly enough. The voicelessness and powerlessness of persons with disabilities must not continue. They must have a voice and, of course, interlocutors open to dialogue to construct inclusive alliances.

In the Caribbean and indeed Trinidad and Tobago the issues of disability, poverty and social exclusion are pivotal to the development debate. In many ways we are still grappling with development concepts, tendencies and initiatives of the developed world. Developing countries tend to follow the trends promoted by the developed countries. Data on best practices can provide the guidance and support needed to take the right course. There are huge costs to society if it fails to consider and include persons with disabilities. Developing countries, such as those in the Caribbean, must strive to ensure that they accept their responsibilities of the policy agenda, particularly the empowerment of the poor of which persons with disabilities form a part.

We must strive for a "Society for All" where policy will state clearly the goal of an inclusive society for all that tolerates and celebrates diversity and promotes equity and social justice; a society within which persons with disabilities have a key role to play.

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