



EMPLOYMENT INCLUSION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN TRINIDAD & TOBAGO

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses obstacles to employment inclusion of persons with disabilities with an emphasis on Trinidad & Tobago as a Caribbean nation, exploring undergirding causes for the prevailing unemployment among persons with disabilities and strategies for transforming this situation. Reference is made to the high unemployment in the sector of persons with disabilities in the Caribbean despite the emphasis of international conventions on the importance of access to work. Root causes for the persistence of high unemployment in the sector in Trinidad and Tobago are explored. A combination of supply- and demand centred interventions are discussed as a means of creating employment opportunities for persons with disabilities and ensuring that they have the competencies to perform effectively in the relevant positions. Finally, specific recommendations are presented to inform the way forward. The paper concludes by emphasizing the importance of capitalizing on the opportunities presented to transform the employment situation of the sector.

OVERVIEW

Approximately fifteen percent of the world population or over one billion people live with one or more disabilities (World Health Organization, 2013). Caribbean estimates range from ten to fifteen percent of the regional population. In 2014, thirty-one years after the United Nations launched the World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons - a global strategy to enhance disability prevention, rehabilitation and equalization of opportunities in social life and national development - persons with disabilities continue to be marginalized in society and denied of their inalienable human rights and various social goods. Critical systemic deficiencies, particularly in the developing world, include the grave disadvantages faced by persons with disabilities in the areas of infrastructure, education and economic activity - particularly employment - among others.

In developing countries, eighty to ninety percent of people with disabilities of working age are unemployed (Zarocostas, 2005 cited in Gottlieb et. al, 2010). In industrialized countries, although the situation is slightly better, fifty to seventy percent of persons with disabilities are unemployed and this is at least twice the rate of those without disabilities (International Disability Rights Monitor 2004 cited in Gottlieb et. al 2010). In a recent public lecture at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine, the feature speaker, President of the Senate of Barbados, Senator Kerryann Ifill quoted a figure of ninety-five percent as the proportion of the Caribbean sector of persons with disabilities who are unable to access viable employment. Furthermore, based on the heavy competition in the labour market compounded by the marginalized position of persons with disabilities, they are often relegated to low-paying positions involving onerous or mundane work that falls below their capabilities and qualifications.

Similar employment deficiencies are also experienced in other parts of the world. In the developed world, however, there are generally better social provisions for persons with disabilities including grants in the US, Canada and the UK being as high as US\$1000 per month and in some cases there are additional benefits such as housing, lifetime education and free disability aids on a renewable basis. In the Caribbean, disability grants are typically less than US\$400 per month which is not nearly enough to cover essential living costs and additional provisions are few to non-existent. As such, the importance of work for persons with disabilities as a means of survival is heightened in the Caribbean context.

By the natural law, persons with disabilities have the same rights and entitlements as all persons and this is endorsed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations, 2006), the Inter-American Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Organization of American States (OAS), 1999) and other conventions. The UNCRPD is the foremost guide in

the world for the management of the situation of persons with disabilities at country levels.

Article 27 of the UNCPRD states that:

“States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities. States Parties shall safeguard and promote the realization of the right to work, including for those who acquire a disability during the course of employment, by taking appropriate steps...”

The International Labour Organization’s Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons) Convention (No. 159) of 1983, ratified by Trinidad and Tobago in 1999, also requires ratifying nations to promote employment opportunities for persons with disabilities in the open labour market (Article 3) (ILO, 1983). Despite these clearly articulated guidelines in the international community, Caribbean nations continue to be largely unresponsive to the responsibility to promote the employment of persons with disabilities. Underlying this inaction is the paucity of research in the field and the lack of tangible, reliable data on the socioeconomic status of persons with disabilities in the region.

The region has taken some measures to address the employment situation of persons with disabilities however there is a fundamental absence of coordinated strategies driving both the supply and demand of qualified persons with disabilities to promote widespread inclusivity in the professional landscape. The commitment to the rights of persons with disabilities has been mixed with even the best examples falling far below the promotion of full participation of this sector on an equal basis with persons without disabilities. (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), 2009).

Trinidad & Tobago is seeking to increase its focus on the sector of persons with disabilities and as such it is important that the critical issues facing the sector in this country are examined with a view to improving the situation. This paper examines the issue of employment inclusion. The following section explores the root causes for the marginalized employment status of the sector.

BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT INCLUSION IN TRINIDAD & TOBAGO

Experience and investigation in the field suggest that root causes for the lack of inclusion of persons with disabilities in employment in this country include the following:

Educational Barriers

Persons with disabilities are often denied a sound education because mainstream education has not made the proper provisions to ensure that special needs children have access to the highest quality of education to suit their particular circumstances. Too many children with disabilities fall through the cracks of the education system and emerge from primary or secondary institutions unable to read, write and demonstrate essential life skills. Yet they are expected to earn their own living in the same job market as persons without disabilities who have not suffered for access to quality education suitable to their needs.

Educational and skill development institutions serving persons with disabilities - which include both mainstream education providers and institutions specializing in special needs education – need to ensure that their curricular, delivery and certification strategies are effectively equipping their clients with the knowledge, skills, abilities and certification to promote their marketability in the professional arena on a sustainable basis. Mainstream providers must become specialists in serving persons with disabilities, recognizing their right to quality education with all reasonable accommodations in place to ensure that they emerge as competitive candidates for further educational opportunities and the job market. Social support systems catering to the social needs of students/ trainees with disabilities must also be improved to facilitate effective special needs education.

Overall, persons with disabilities, like all other candidates for the job market, must be effectively equipped and groomed with all the competencies they require to perform and deliver in the

organizations they serve over the long term. There are no favours to be won in this matter. Employers want to hire people who have been prepared to deliver. This is one of the most powerful links in promoting the employability of persons with disabilities.

Unwillingness of Employers to Assume Responsibility for Hiring Persons with Disabilities

A majority of employers are yet to recognize the business case via social responsibility for hiring persons with disabilities. Beyond this some employers see hiring a person with a disability as increasing the occupational risk factors and the costs of their companies. Typically, they are not prepared to take on such perceived risks and the costs of enabling accommodations though they may empathize with the plight of persons with disabilities and respond by writing generous cheques to organizations that work with them.

Weak Legislative and Policy Frameworks

To date only eight Caribbean countries have ratified the UNCRPD. This speaks poorly of nations' commitment to securing the human rights and freedoms of an estimated ten to fifteen percent of their populations. Trinidad & Tobago signed the Convention in 2007 but is yet to ratify it. Furthermore, to date, there is no Disability Act to protect the rights and freedoms of persons with disabilities as a most vulnerable sector of the society. This lack of legislation on disability issues is a pervasive part of life in the Caribbean. On a more positive note, at a recent CARICOM meeting in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, a number of ministerial officials with responsibility for disability affairs committed to developing national legal frameworks to promote the rights and needs of persons with disabilities (CARICOM, 2013).

Lack of Institutional Support from Governments

Even in the absence of formal legislation, a supportive institutional culture would be fertile ground for significant progress in the area of inclusive employment. Governments are among the most influential employers in the Caribbean and as such they set the tone for employment inclusion. If the Government of Trinidad & Tobago and its partnering organizations demonstrate an authentic appreciation of their particular responsibility to promote and cultivate the inclusion of persons with disabilities in socioeconomic life, this would have significant implications for the national culture and dominant attitudes towards disability. However, in the absence of systemic, systematic, positive and consistent strategies to transform the culture of the professional and wider societal life towards inclusion, apathy towards this cause is sustained and nourished.

The Government needs to be cognizant of the fact that aggressively pursuing absolute inclusion in society is not a favour but a duty. Furthermore, such action is not only for the benefit of persons with disabilities and their support systems. Creating an inclusive society would benefit the entire citizenry as the region would become a more diverse, enlightened and sophisticated territory. The alternative is the persistence of ignorance and deprivation of the knowledge and consciousness that national peoples stand to gain – individually and collectively - from cultivating societies that are rich in diversity of not only creed and race but also ability.

Advanced societies reflect an institutional commitment to assuring citizens of their fundamental rights and freedoms and access to the social goods that they need and enjoy. Work is an important vehicle to attaining such a state of well being and to deny persons the opportunity to progress towards this is to breed a culture of ignorance, injustice, poverty, lack and inequality. It also denies the countries involved of the developmental potential implied by the creative and productive capacities of persons with disabilities who are prepared to make unique contributions to the professional life.

Desultory, one-off attempts at impacting the situation of persons with disabilities cannot substitute for the paternalistic and committed approach that the Government ought to assume in these matters by virtue of the trust that is vested in it when officials are voted into office and supported in their governance by national peoples and the international community. The Government must see it as a critical priority to ensure that this most vulnerable sector of society is not deprived of the quality of life that they deserve on account of their humanity.

Infrastructural Barriers

The inaccessibility of buildings, washroom facilities, transport services and the like for persons with disabilities make quality education and stable employment prohibitive for many persons. Lack of access denies persons of their entitlement to self-actualization in their education, careers and other aspects of societal progress.

Attitudinal Barriers

Ignorance, stigmatization and unwillingness to change have been persistent obstacles to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in society including the workforce. People with disabilities often express a sense of rejection by mainstream society as many persons remain resistant to seeing them as people just like themselves and treating them as such rather than as charity cases or unusual beings who deserve to be relegated to the edges of society. This will continue until the relevant social powers use their influence to transform societal attitudes towards the sector.

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT INCLUSION - SUPPLY & DEMAND

Despite these obstacles, research shows that there is considerable potential for persons with disabilities to be successfully integrated into the workforce. A recent tracer study conducted by

the National Centre for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) in Trinidad and Tobago gave support to this perspective. The study focused on graduates and apprentices who exited the Centre in 2013. The results indicated that thirty-nine percent of NCPD's exiting graduates and apprentices in 2013 accessed viable, paid employment in less than six months after leaving the Centre. Approximately thirty-one percent of subjects were pursuing further studies or on-the-job training. Fifteen percent of subjects were engaged in unpaid work such as babysitting or rearing an animal. Fifteen percent of subjects were not engaged in any form of work or formal productive activity as indicated by their caregivers. A longer-term tracer study suggested that over the ten year period from 2001 to 2010, fifty-seven percent of NCPD graduates went on to access viable employment.

The results suggest that NCPD's work in skill development and job placement is a positive strategy for promoting the employment inclusion of persons with disabilities. A good strategy for impacting the employment situation of persons with disabilities may therefore lie in investing in more specialized institutions focused on the empowerment of persons with disabilities through vocational rehabilitation, training and job placement to equip them with the skills and other aspects of professional preparation that will help them to become competitive players in the job market. These institutions can be creatively designed to promote social integration. For example, they can offer employment, educational programmes, internships and co-curricular activities to persons with disabilities as well as persons without disabilities.

On the demand side, it is critical for countries to develop legislative and institutional frameworks that would drive the demand for persons with disabilities in the workforce. Such frameworks would encompass elements such as:

- Disability quotas subject to penalties for non-compliance – Many countries use a quota system requiring about two to seven percent of their workforces or at least their public

sectors to comprise persons with disabilities. Compliance rates are generally between fifty and seventy percent (United Nations Enable, 2014). This strategy was launched in the Jamaican public sector in 2008 but has not yet come into full effect. A number of Latin American countries have also made use of the quota system. Argentina has a quota of five percent applicable to all branches of the State and private companies that are public service providers. Brazil uses a quota system in which the required percentage of persons with disabilities employed increases with firm size and salaries are typically paid by Centres for Independent Living (CILs) and other Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs). In Venezuela, companies with more than fifty employees must meet a quota of at least two percent and State and private companies in general have three years to meet the minimum requirement of five percent. According to the ILO, quotas should reflect consideration of the number of persons with disabilities in the job market and the number of jobs that would be created by the quota system (ILO, 2007).

- Concessions for employers hiring a certain percentage of persons with disabilities; This would complement a voluntary quota system like that introduced in the Netherlands in 2006;
- Sheltered employment arrangements for persons requiring such – This would be particularly valuable in cases involving persons with severe mental, intellectual and/or physical disabilities. Switzerland, which has one of the highest employment rates for persons with disabilities, draws heavily on this strategy. Sheltered employment is controversial on account of its association with the charity ethos. A recent European trend has been the transition from sheltered workshops to social firms. With effective human resource strategies such firms could creatively hire both persons with disabilities and persons without disabilities to promote social integration.

- Increased on-the-job training opportunities for persons with disabilities complete with reasonable accommodations;
- Public investment in aggressive public advocacy and sensitization to transform the culture away from inherited misconceptions and biases against persons with disabilities and their inclusion in the workplace. This is consistent with Article 8 of the UNCRPD.

Monitoring, evaluation, audit and redress systems can be used to address such issues as employer compliance, treatment of employees with disabilities and the like. The more emphatic and forceful regulators are in ensuring compliance, the more employers can be expected to get on board with such measures.

In many cases persons with disabilities are relegated to the types of work that no-one else wants to do on account of their marginalized employment status. There is yet potential for increasing the emphasis on self actualization in workforce development. This would involve promoting access to high-quality jobs; to work that one enjoys and in which one experiences an authentic sense of satisfaction, achievement and happiness rather than merely working to provide for one's material needs. This is consistent with the ILO definition of decent work which is understood as follows: "Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that are productive and deliver a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men" (ILO, 2014).

There is also a critical need for well coordinated research efforts to develop the knowledge base on disability in the region. Tangible, reliable data and information are urgently needed to

promote enhanced strategy and decision making on socioeconomic factors relating to disability including workforce inclusion.

Overall, a multi-pronged approach is needed to target systemic deficiencies that perpetuate an imbalance in employment hinged on the issue of disability. Supply- and demand-centred strategies must be used in tandem to cultivate a situation in which decent work is accessible to persons with disabilities and they are effectively equipped for high performance in available positions. Such strategies should be based on tangible data and information sourced through well coordinated research. States have a responsibility to facilitate, protect and remedy to promote a culture of diversity (Yurén, 2013). As such, countries must respond to the knowledge of problem areas and recommended strategies with appropriate action.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

In view of the above, the following recommendations are presented to inform the way forward:

1. Remedial action must be taken to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to the quality of education and training that will allow them to be as competitive as persons without disabilities in the job market. Education and training providers serving persons with disabilities must be held accountable for providing the highest standards of education and training to their clients such that their graduates demonstrate the essential competencies required for success in the world of work. Competence-based learning is currently being highlighted in the international community and local education and training providers must get on board in developing their capacities, human resources, curricula and delivery strategies to ensure that they effectively and efficiently facilitate their clients in mastering the knowledge, skills and abilities that they require to transition into the world of work on a sustainable basis. Furthermore, training opportunities should be certifiable since well

recognized, high quality certification is a critical requirement of employers in the Caribbean job market.

Education must go beyond the trend in which persons with special needs are limited to weak primary special education and sub-standard secondary, technical-vocational and tertiary education. The bar must be raised to ensure that persons with disabilities emerging from school life are just as competitive in the employment market as persons without disabilities. This is a critical link in the promotion of employment inclusion.

2. The Government of Trinidad & Tobago must increase its focus on developing and enforcing demand-centred strategies for promoting workforce inclusion such as those discussed above, including disability quotas with appropriate compliance mechanisms, employer concessions for recruiting and retaining persons with disabilities, sheltered employment arrangements for those requiring it, increased on-the-job training programmes for persons with disabilities and the promotion of public awareness on disability in the workplace.
3. All efforts must be made to regularize the legal standing of persons with disabilities in the country. Relevant acts and other legal provisions must authenticate attempts to promote social inclusion, particularly in the area of employment.
4. Private sector organizations should be engaged to partner with the Government, non-governmental organizations and advocacy groups serving persons with disabilities to execute aggressive public awareness campaigns to overcome attitudinal barriers to the socioeconomic inclusion of persons with disabilities.

These recommendations are not exhaustive and the country is encouraged to be engaged in continuous and systematic review of the socioeconomic situation of persons with disabilities and their inclusion in employment in particular with a view to developing increasingly sophisticated solutions. The ideal is to progress in every strategic cycle towards a society of absolute inclusion in all aspects of societal functioning including employment as a critical path to socioeconomic independence and participation.

CONCLUSION

The lack of inclusion of persons with disabilities in the workforce denies persons of their human right to decent work and national societies of the productive and creative capacities of a significant proportion of their people. There are, however, a number of opportunities readily available to Trinidad & Tobago as it seeks to lay the foundations for a better quality of life for persons with disabilities and in particular their inclusion in the professional life. These opportunities should be harnessed in order to cultivate an authentically diverse society in this country and the wider Caribbean; a society that all people can truly be proud to call their own.

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