POVERTY AS POWERLESSNESS IN CONTEMPORARY DISABILITY STUDIES:
THE CASE OF ZIMBABWE.
This paper discusses the prevailing negative social attitudes towards disability and the effects these have on their participation in national economic empowerment programmes.
In doing so, the paper is largely informed by the social model of disability. As we all know, the social model defines disability as the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have [impairments] and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities. Looked at from this standpoint, Disability resides in a nexus of social relationships connecting those socially identified as impaired and those deemed non-impaired or normal, relationships that worked to exclude and disadvantage the former while promoting the relative inclusion and privileging of the latter(Thomas, 2004:33)
The social model of disability does in no way seek to blame all challenges encountered by persons with disabilities on external factors. Rather, to provide an alternative explanation of the extent to which society contributes towards the problems encountered by people with impairments (Oliver 2004: 21).
It is not within the scope of this paper to examine the social model of disability. However, the intention is to demonstrate that poverty among persons with disabilities, especially those with visual impairments and albinism is largely caused by the skewed social structures together with the attitudes of the able-bodied persons in charge of various national economic portfolios in both the public and private sectors.
This paper is a result of qualitative in-depth interviews with five persons with visual impairments as well as five persons with albinism domiciled in Harare. In addition, the author conducted a single focus group discussion with persons with albinism to get a collective view of their social and economic situation.
Findings revealed that Lack of a disability sensitive bureaucracy, negative social attitudes towards disabilities as well as lack of information in accessible formats all served to perpetuate poverty among persons with visual impairments and albinism rather than inherent physical and intellectual deficiencies borne out of impairments.
LACK OF COLATERAL SECURITY
Participants revealed that most of them came from poor social and economic backgrounds. As such, they did not have the collateral security required to meaningfully participate in most national economic empowerment programmes.
Cogniscent of the prohibitive demands for collateral security put in place by financial institutions, the Zimbabwean government promulgated the National Policy on the Indigenization of the Economy (1998) as well as the Indigenization and Economic Empowerment Act of 2007. In terms of this statute, “indigenization” means a deliberate involvement of indigenous Zimbabweans in the economic activities of the country, to which hitherto they had no access, so as to ensure the equitable ownership of the nation’s resources.”
Such a statutory framework saw the establishment of the National Indigenization and Economic Empowerment Board to administer the National Indigenization and Economic Empowerment Fund.

Participants indicated that persons with disabilities were not benefiting much from this fund mainly on account of their disability.
NEGATIVE ATTITUDES/PERCEIVED LACK OF CAPACITY
Discussions with participants via in-depth interviews revealed that the other challenge catalyzing the exclusion of persons with disabilities from economic and political life of society was that societal expectations dictate that their activities be restricted to charity. As such, their quest to actively participate in national economic empowerment programmes would represent a deviation from the norm.
“When we demanded our share of the land during the fast track land reform programme, some senior government officials turned down our request on account of the fact that none would till the land for us since we were visually impaired. The argument was that we would not even see the fields even if we get the land”.
As a group of women with visual impairment, we formed a consortium in order to grab a niche in the mining ventures in line with government’s encouragement for indigenous Zimbabweans to venture into small scale mining. Having put everything together including the required funds, our bid was shot down simply on account of perceived incapacity. The argument was that “how do you want to undertake the mining business. It is too risky especially for you because you cannot see. How are you going to see the gold from your mine? Workers will steal from you. Even us who can see are losing a lot of gold to thieves. The best you can do is to partner us rather than going it alone”.
LACK OF INFORMATION IN ACCESSIBLE FORMATS
Lack of information regarding the availability of loans was cited by participants as an obstacle when it comes to claiming the right to economic participation. Information on the availability of funds under the scheme is usually disseminated through the print media much to the disadvantage of those citizens with visual impairments or even at political rallies usually held in the open and not accessible to persons with albinism.
The national economic policies and programmes should be publicized. This should be done through the organizations that represent persons with disabilities.
In addition, the department of Social Services and other government departments that are key stakeholders in national disability policy and programmes in the country should be used as a vehicle for conveying such information in accessible formats such as Braille and sign language.
Evidently, any national bureaucracy that does not reflect the demographic features of the population it serves tends to be biased and prejudicial to the less represented social groups. In this light, promoting persons with disabilities right across the national administrative structure of government is likely to result in the protection of the economic and political interests of the disability constituency.
Besides being the most sustainable and dependable form of social protection in general, government could as well serve a lot of resources by economically empowering persons with disabilities, especially those who can work and in turn pay taxes thereby contributing directly to the national fiscus.
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