

PRESENTATION
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- This paper examines the nexus between disability and unemployment before linking the two to social protection. The paper examines the obstacles faced by persons with disabilities in gaining entry into the formal labour market.

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- Social protection remains a vital part of poverty reduction. To that end, the marginalised groups in society tend to be less covered by social protection programmes than those enjoying social and economic advantage. This paper is a result of a qualitative study of the extent to which persons with disabilities participate in the economic and social life of Zimbabwe. On this note, the paper interviewed persons with albinism and those with visual impairment. The paper also sought information from three key informants from mainstream civil society organizations.

- In this regards, one representative of a prominent trade union, a representative of an influential civil society organisation as well as one representative of an organisation for women economic empowerment were interviewed.

- For persons with disability, flair of attitudinal, environmental and institutional barriers have tended to militate against their ability to benefit from social insurance.

- Using the lenses of the social model of disability, (see Oliver, 2004 and Drake, 1999), the paper argues that the participation of persons with disabilities on the labour market is very difficult.

- It is worth emphasizing that in terms of the social model, 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.

- For this paper, such a state of affairs has tended to make persons with disabilities more of a charity case, having to depend solely on social assistance. Unfortunately, social assistance in developing countries is hardly dependable.

- In the absence of formal employment, this leaves most persons with disabilities vulnerable to shocks. The ultimate result being that in urban areas, they resort to begging to make ends meet.

- There is compelling evidence that the main source of income for 80–90 percent of families in most countries is their labour.

- In the case of Zimbabwe, such social services as housing, access to health care and higher education are now a preserve of the privileged few rather than fundamental national rights provided for in the national constitution.

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- The introduction of user fees in health and education has meant that only those with the means are able to access quality medical care while the poor continue to suffer from the diseases of poverty such as cholera and typhoid, diseases of which result from the poverty of housing and social amenities.

- This is particularly dire for persons with disabilities, whose alternatives outside formal employment are scarce mainly due to the environmental barriers erected by society

- Complaining about negative attitudes at the workplace one of the participants emotional remarked thus: “to be frank I have been to three or four interviews. I however suspect that they call me for interviews after they have heard the voice on the phone. When they see the person physically, their interest simply wanes. I say so largely because everyone in the interview starts asking you such questions as; so how will you make your way to work? Would you need an assistant?”

- Similarly, another participant revealed that at his workplace colleagues' rise through the ranks not because they possess higher qualifications than his, rather, unlike him, they were able-bodied.

- Similarly, another participant had served a public organisation as a lawyer without being considered for promotion simply on account of his visual impairment. The participant revealed that his bosses did not allow him to perform duties commensurate with his grade and professional qualifications simply on account of visual impairment.

- Worse still, the bosses insisted that his personal assistant could not be entrusted with secrets of the job because he did not hold the requisite qualifications.

- On the same note, the other participant with albinism narrated her ordeal the other time she wanted to secure a job as a shop assistant. From her account, she and a black colleague heard about an employment opportunity with a local supermarket. They both applied for the job and were told to expect responses after a week.

- After a few days, her black friend was offered the job but she was not. On inquiring further, her friend advised her that the feeling there was that her albinism was considered scary. As such, employing her would simply scare away customers.

- Similarly, negative attitudes towards disability are even deep rooted in those institutions charged with protecting human rights, particularly those in civil society organizations.

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- As a result, no matter how strong the disability fraternity may put their case across to government to enact disability friendly legislation, as long as disability does not have space in civil society organizations, such efforts are likely to hit a snag.

- Even if donors place disability programming as a prerequisite for funding, agencies still proceed to formulate and implement disability related programmes on the basis of misinformation. This has resulted in these programmes falling far short of the inclusive character permissible in disability rights programming.

- The other challenge militating against the quest of persons with disability to secure formal employment is lack of the required academic qualifications. To this, participants cited a flawed education system that did not take account of the special needs of such a social group.

- For instance, the practice of hot sitting common to most rural and urban schools tends to disadvantage children with albinism who cannot withstand excessive heat from the sun

- Regrettably, there is no recognition that children with albinism need protective clothing including appropriate school uniform. Because of that, persons with albinism in Zimbabwe have continued on the lane of poverty largely on account of poor educational qualifications, making them good candidates for national statistics on those out of employment.

- The same plight applied to persons with visual impairments who cited poor education facilities and prospects caused largely by unresponsive institutional frameworks to the scourge of poverty and unemployment characteristic of the disability fraternity in the country.

- Participants indicated that not all examination centres accommodated persons with visual impairment under the pretext that they needed Brailled question papers and other specialized equipment.

- Given the challenges associated with visual impairment that include poverty and sometimes limited mobility, such institutional imperatives potentially scuttle any prospects such people may have to pursue some education thereby limiting their opportunities to participate on the labour market.

- Further to that, low levels of educational attainment for persons with disabilities were cited as producing a sense of inadequacy and lowered self esteem. The ultimate result of low educational levels is usually reduced capacity to fight for one's rights.

- Another key informant specializing in cooperative banking and credit schemes for women indicated that their organization had no disability programme. She attested that their entry point in communities was through traditional leaders. Thereafter, they always make use of the most alert and vocal members of the community as key members. She testified that due to “our culture” the disabled are usually left out of our programmes because communities do not think they are economically active and important. As a result, they are just left out and people don’t even know that they are there.

- Even though Lack of self-esteem and confidence was cited by many participants as contributing to poverty and lack of innovation. It is here argued that such is the result of continued social and economic exclusion rather than innate personal inadequacies borne out of impairments. A country's economic development is embedded in its social organization, and addressing structural inequities requires not only economic changes but also societal transformation.

- There was consensus among all participants that the creation of employment opportunities remains the panacea to poverty reduction and economic emancipation for a social group for which charity has not worked for too long.

- In conclusion, disability and poverty are largely synonymous, with those labeled disabled being overly represented on the statistics of those living in poverty. Worse still, access to social protection remains a challenge for persons with disability.

- Lack of employment opportunities, reduced prospects of promotion at work as well as low levels of educational attainment serve to book this social group a permanent seat on the train of poverty and vulnerability more than any other social groups.

- It therefore remains vital that national employment policies pay close attention to the protection of persons with disabilities on the labour market.