

TITLE: EQUALIZATION OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

MESSAGE Government to take action to ensure equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities

Executive Summary

Persons with Disabilities should be recognized and be full participants in the planning of national programmes and services to ensure equalization of opportunities. There are many obstacles that affect the lives of PWDs, thereby, making their living conditions worse.

Measures such as access to medical facilities, recognition of their right to family life and training in various programmes, can improve their living conditions. Once they are trained, they would be self-reliant and there would be no difference between the PWD and the able-bodied. Consequently, their living conditions would automatically change and at the same time, their lives would also improve.

Another way of ensuring equal opportunities is to raise awareness on disability issues to society using the media and also involving PWDs themselves.

Programmes of action to make the physical environment accessible to PWDs should be intensified. Government should play an important role in implementing such programmes and make sure that all infrastructures are disability friendly.

Supplying and developing support services for mobility, information, personal care and protection and also household devices for PWDs can also increase their level of independence. The devices can enable them to freely socialize with the society as regards to information and the use of places of interest.

Introduction

Persons with disabilities (PWDs) have for a long time struggled for inclusion in all spheres of life. Their participation is limited, not because of their disabilities, but because of negative attitudes from the society at large. Therefore, there is need for government to address issues of PWDs and empower them to participate fully as equal partners in society.

Raising awareness to society about PWDs' potentials and contributions is essential. The media is one of the most important tools to use when raising awareness on disability issues to the society. Disseminating information could be through press conferences, interviews, radio drama, newspaper articles and press releases. The involvement of PWDs in national programmes such as the World Water Day or World AIDS Day is also another way of bringing disability awareness to the society. Their involvement in such programmes would show the society that PWDs are able to participate in community development activities.

Training personnel involved in the planning and provision of services concerning PWDs should also be prioritised. It has been observed that people who are involved in the planning of services concerning PWDs are not fully trained. Government therefore should allocate enough budgets to the service providers in order for them to be trained and be aware of the needs of PWDs.

Encouraging PWDs to participate in cultural, recreation, sports and religious activities in their communities would also increase awareness. This would enable the society to de-stigmatise.

Introducing programmes of action to make the physical environment accessible would be required. There is need for construction of friendly structures to enable PWDs have access. The study on living conditions report of

September 2004, shows that 34.8% of PWDs never attended school and 46.4% left school. The reasons were that they had problems of mobility, schools were not accessible (wheelchairs could not be wheeled in) schools had no Braille material or sign language interpreters. As a result many are illiterate.

To address this matter, the Ministry of Education should have disability friendly schools to enable those children with special needs have access to education. They should also have Braille and large print materials available in all schools, and train more special needs education teachers. Re-introduction of adult literacy education programmes should also be intensified at community level.

Government should enforce the current policies that all infrastructures are disability friendly. All the buildings that have two or more storeys should have lifts to enable those PWDs who use wheelchairs and crutches access them easily. Religious institutions should be accessible to PWDs. The national study report on Living Conditions of people with Activity Limitation (September 2004) revealed that most people with physical disabilities do not go to church because, either they are very far or have a lot of steps. The policy makers should be working hand-in-hand with town planners and PWDs themselves to find ways and means of making the structures accessible to PWDs.

Developing and supplying support services for PWDs is essential. Personal mobility, especially to people with physical and visual impairment is a challenge. Statistics in the study report on Living Conditions of People with Activity Limitation (September 2004) revealed that 19% of those using mobility devices acquired them from government health services. This is quite small as compared to the number of persons with physical and visual impairment in Malawi. Government needs to do more and put in place measures to produce more devices to benefit them and ease their problem of failing to socialize with other people. This would also increase their level of independence in their daily living and exercise their right of freedom of movement.

There also appears to be less personal care and protection devices such as special fasteners, bath and shower seats, toilet seat raisers and safety rails. Other devices such as flashing light on doorbells should also be installed in hotels and other places of interest. These would give people with hearing impairment a signal that someone wants their attention. There is need for government to put it as law that all hotels and lodges should have such types of devices to assist PWDs use them when they are accommodated in these places.

Improving the living conditions of PWDs is also a matter to be taken care of. Providing effective medical care to PWDs is also a basic need. But there is still a long way to go to change the attitude of the medical personnel towards PWDs. Rehabilitation programmes must build alliances with the health services and remind them that health services are vital to prevention of disabilities. Government should therefore put in place measures to the health personnel not to discriminate PWDs when giving treatment.

Increasing mobile health clinics should be another area of priority because people with mobility challenges would be benefiting from them. This would assist them to receive treatment at their doorstep, thereby, improving their health.

Full participation in family life is also one area of improving the living conditions of PWDs. Government should ensure that laws do not discriminate against PWDs with respect to sexual and reproductive health, marriage and parenthood. A policy should be put in place to take legal action where rights of PWDs have been violated. PWDs, like anyone else, have the right to love and to be loved, to belong to a family, to marriage and parenthood.

Lives of PWDs can also be improved if government and other stakeholders introduce training programmes on income generating activities. If PWDs were empowered economically, they would start small business

enterprises, rather than depend on handouts. Handouts cannot improve their lives but will make them dependant. Government, especially Ministry of Social Development and PWDs should stop giving handouts, but encourage them to form groups and access loans from lending institutions. This would enable them to be self-independent, and at the same time improve their living conditions.

In conclusion, every PWD has a fundamental right to equal opportunities in order to achieve and maintain acceptable standards of living. Government should therefore assume the responsibility of ensuring that PWDs are granted equal opportunities with other citizens. This would give them an opportunity to utilize their creative and intellectual potentials fully. Not only for their own benefit but also for the benefit of the society at large.

Implementing the results from the report on Living Conditions among People with Activity Limitations together with other relevant sources should be government's obligation. This would act as a basis for defining the situation for PWDs and assess for itself whether this marginalized group is having equal opportunities with the society.