



Wither Zimbabwe @ 40 and Persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe:

A Reflection

The month of April is an important month in the calendar of Zimbabwe. In the month of April, Zimbabwe celebrates independence from colonial rule. 2020 is a unique year for Zimbabwe as Zimbabwe attains 40 years since independence. 40 years signifies maturity and that is a measure of maturity for nations. Persons with disabilities are estimated to constitute an estimated 10 per cent of the population of Zimbabwe. As Zimbabwe turns 40, the journey for persons with disabilities has been difficult and bumpy with more tears than joyful moments. While there have been some gains such as the development of a Disabled Persons Act in 1992, this has not been updated and has remained largely unimplemented. Zimbabwe signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2013 and this has not been domesticated thus remains a promise on paper. Two seats for senators representing persons with disabilities were introduced in the constitution of 2013, while good it's a heavy burden of representation for an estimated 10 per cent of the population. Sign language saw legal recognition in 2013 and this is still to be fully operationalised. The constitution of 2013 has progressive measures for persons with disabilities and these are yet to be fully enjoyed by persons with disabilities.

Persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe face disproportionate levels of poverty, lack of access to education, health services, and employment and under representation in decision making and political participation.

The main barriers to inclusion include stigma, discrimination, lack of access to communication, physical and virtual environment, lack of access to assistive devices as well as lack of support for independent living. Deaf Zimbabwe Trust will use the Social Progress Index as tool to assess the status of persons with disabilities in the country as Zimbabwe celebrates 40 years. Social progress defined as the capacity of a society to meet the basic human needs of its citizens, establish the building blocks that allow citizens and communities to enhance and sustain the quality of their lives, and create the conditions for all individuals to reach their full potential.

The social progress index asks very important questions that persons with disabilities ask in various fora. Does a country provide for its people's most essential needs? Are the building blocks in place for individuals and communities to enhance and sustain wellbeing? Is there

opportunity for all individuals to reach their full potential? Answering these questions will shed light into the extent to which persons with disabilities have experienced 40 years of independence.

Access to education for persons with disabilities

Children with Disabilities in Primary School

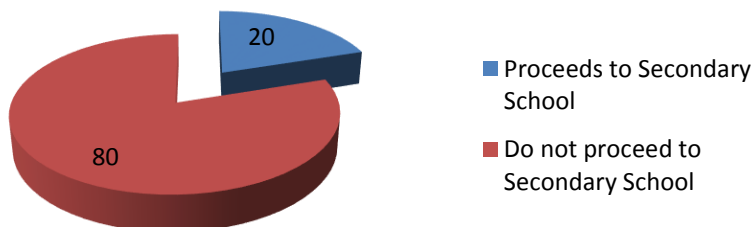


As Zimbabwe celebrates 40 years of independence only 10 per cent of children with disabilities have access to primary school and the rest are in the homes. This means a life of poverty for themselves and their children. This means poor life outcomes for over 600 000 children with disabilities. Zimbabwe does not have an Inclusive Education Policy that operationalises the Education Amendment Act to ensure that children with disabilities access

quality education.

Research has shown that less than 20 per cent of children with disabilities transition to secondary school from primary school. The reasons for attrition include lack of secondary schools near them with resource units, lack of disability friendly facilities that make it difficult for children with other disabilities to be in school, lack of assistive devices and services such as wheelchairs, lack of qualified personnel in the school, negative attitudes and discriminatory attitudes in the schools.

Transition to Secondary School for children with disabilities



Access to higher education



Access to higher education is a function of access to lower levels of education and statistics show that less than 3 per cent of persons with disabilities have access to higher education. At each level more persons with disabilities are lost. In Zimbabwe, a significant number of colleges and other institutions of higher education do not have Disability Resource Centres that enable them to provide services to persons with disabilities. Colleges do not have inclusive policies. There is no policy at national level that mandates colleges to enrol persons with disabilities. Exclusion has not been even among persons with disabilities. Persons with physical disabilities and those with visual impairments have had better chances of education hence can be found in various professional spaces. However persons who are Deaf have not been able to access education as a result of lack of sign language provisions in lower and higher education.

Exclusion in education has far reaching implications for persons with disabilities in their lives as well as those of their children thus negatively impacting generations.

Access to health care

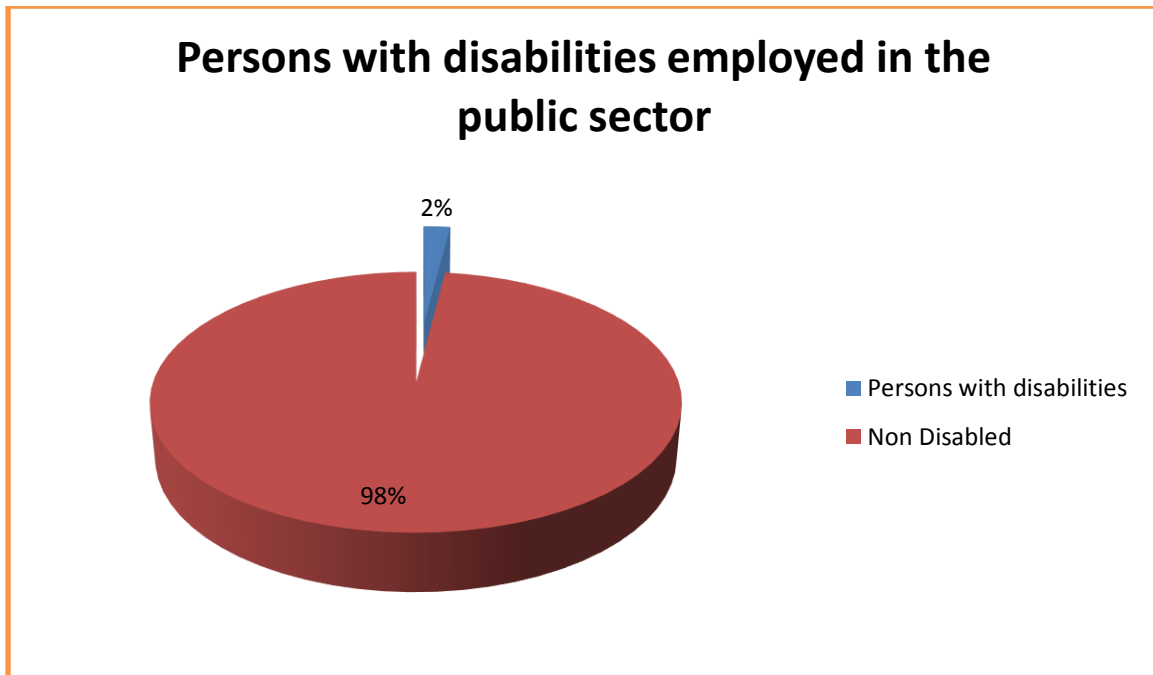
Persons with disabilities continue to struggle to access quality health care. The first challenge is the lack of disaggregated statistics in health centres that creates invisibility of persons with disabilities. How do health centres prepare for persons they do not know? Persons with disabilities struggle with infrastructure that is inaccessible, lack of sign language interpreters in health centres, discriminatory and stigmatising attitudes by health officials. It is 40 years after independence and quality health care remains unreachable for persons with disabilities.

Assistive devices

Related to health care is the issue of assistive devices. Assistive devices increase the independence of persons with disabilities yet those in need of assistive devices have not been able to access them. The cost of assistive devices in Zimbabwe is prohibitive. The majority of persons with disabilities are born to poor families thus making assistive devices unavailable. Some assistive devices such as crutches and hearing aids are low tech yet they are still unavailable for those who need them. Zimbabwe has had 40 years to practice with sign

language competencies but sign language only got legal recognition in 2013. Deaf and hard of hearing people continue to face exclusion and marginalisation through inaccessible communication. The violation of language rights takes place in homes, schools and communities as well as at the national level. Persons with physical disabilities who need wheelchairs are not able to access them due to high costs of procurement. The average wheelchair costs USD\$300 and this is beyond the average family in Zimbabwe. 40 years after independence a wheel chair remains a dream yet it is so basic.

Access to employment



Persons with disabilities are underrepresented in employment statistics in Zimbabwe. Exclusion in the employment sector is a result from different reasons including; lack of educational opportunities, discrimination and stigma, employers who perceive employing persons with disabilities as expensive, work spaces that are not disability friendly and the lack of laws that mandate inclusion of persons with disabilities in the workforce. Zimbabwe's public sector has not led by example and has only 2 per cent of persons with disabilities employed by the government.

Participation in national processes, leadership and decision making for persons with disabilities

Persons with disabilities have not been able to exercise their citizenship through participation in decisions that affect their day to day lives. Participation in electoral process is a basic measure of participation in national processes. While the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission registered 5,695,706, an estimated 29 000 represented persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities are under-represented in decision making positions. In parliament there are 2 Senators representing persons with disabilities and the burden of representation is high for the few senators. An analysis of state and non-state institution shows that institutions do not have

disability inclusion policies that ensure the representation of persons with disabilities in these institutions.

While the metrics presented are few, they are an indication that while Zimbabwe has come to maturity turning 40, persons with disabilities remain poor, marginalised and excluded in most aspects of the Zimbabwean life. For social inclusion to be a reality in the next decade in which Zimbabwe aims to be middle income economy by 2030, inclusion of persons with disabilities should be priority. Social progress is a driver of economic development. Including persons with disabilities in education, health, and sense of opportunity, will have a positive impact on national productivity and prevent waste that comes from the underutilisation of skills and talents of persons with disabilities. Inclusion entails policy choices, investment decisions and stakeholder engagement to ensure that no one is left behind. This reflection ends with the statement by Mahatma Ghandi who said “A nation’s greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members.” As a nation how great are we? Our greatness will be measured by the extent to which persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe feel secure, have access to basic needs and have equal opportunity at happiness and success.

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