

ENABLING THE ABLE-BODIED

Globally, more than a billion people live with disability. They do not need anyone's pity or sympathy, but rather the removal of barriers that prevent them from exercising their right to live and work in an equal society, writes *Tim Hart*.

Do you ever stop for a moment to think of those who have never heard the sounds of children laughing or the jazz ensembles of Hugh Masekela, or of those who have never seen a rainbow after a Highveld thundershower?

What do you really know about the young woman in the supermarket struggling to reach products from the confines of her wheelchair?

Or the old man in the rural village in a dilapidated wheelchair who relies on others to move him around, as there are no sidewalks or paved roads?

Have you ever considered the constant fear of your senior colleague who is concerned that they might suddenly suffer a severe epileptic episode while chairing a meeting?

Impairment that results in a disability may be present from birth, a consequence of a serious injury or illness, or related to a person's life stage. As people age, they become more susceptible to certain impairments and the impact is often exacerbated by poverty and inequality. In 2011, more than a billion people or 15% of the global population lived with some form of disability.

Disability in South Africa

Last year's Community Survey indicates that approximately 7.7% of the South African population are people with one or more disabilities. This means that they are affected by at least one permanent, recurring or progressively worsening impairment. Statistics South Africa has pointed out that this figure is probably slightly higher than 12%, because many don't acknowledge their impairment. To do so may feel humiliating, is viewed a sign of weakness or they fear discrimination.

South Africa's increased association with international organisations has led us to broader and more accurate definitions of what constitutes a disability. As a result, our national surveys have improved. They are more sensitive and ask appropriate and dignified questions to obtain an accurate indication of people with disabilities in South Africa.

Commemoration days for people with disabilities have nothing to do with the need for pity, sympathy or welfare support.

While disability is generally equated with a physical impairment, such as confinement to a wheelchair, the loss of limbs or their usage, it also includes sensory, cognitive, mental, developmental and emotional impairments, or some combination thereof. Recent statistics from the 2016 Community Survey indicate the diversity of disabilities encountered by South Africans. More than 10% are visually impaired and just under 4% are hearing impaired. Almost 2% have a communication impairment and close to 3% have difficulty with self-care. Slightly less than 4.5% have difficulty remembering and almost 5.5% have a walking or mobility impairment.

These figures confirm that an individual can have more than one impairment that results in a disability. Similarly, the presence of one impairment may increase the chance of the occurrence of another. For example, a person with autism is more likely to suffer epileptic episodes

than a person without autism. Disabilities may cause other medical conditions, such as pressure sores, gradual organ deterioration, bad posture or poor physical growth, poor development and a reduced life span.

Celebrating achievements

Being a person with a disability does not and should not prevent one from participating completely in society – culturally, socially, politically and economically. Every year, South Africa observes National Disability Rights Awareness Month from 3 November to 3 December, which is the International Day of Persons with Disabilities and National Disability Rights Awareness Day.

This commemoration of people with disabilities has nothing to do with the need for pity, sympathy or welfare support. It is a period in which South Africans celebrate the gains and the continued obligation to address challenges faced by this sector. Gains include the promotion, entrenchment and protection of human and socio-economic rights of people with disabilities and other marginalised groups in South Africa. It also includes recognition of diversity within the sector. If anything is sought by people with disabilities; it is simply dignity, respect and recognition, as equal members of and contributors to South African society.

Changing mindsets

The people with disabilities movement has spent several decades promoting their inclusion into all spheres of society and in ensuring their rights. The movement has been committed to changing perceptions about disability in South Africa away from medical and welfare models to social and human rights understandings. The medical model emphasises the impairment (e.g. physical, sensory, neurological or cognitive functioning)

Year	2002	2004	2006	2008	2012	2014	2016
PWD as a share of the workforce in SA	1%	0.6%	0.7%	0.8%	1.4%	1.5%	0.9%

Source: Author's adaptations using CEE Annual Report 2016-2017 (2017) and DSD National Development Plan 2030: Persons with disabilities (PWD) as equal citizens (2015).

and this is considered the cause of inequality. The solution from the medical model point of view is to view people with disabilities as patients and to prescribe or even impose medical treatment. The welfare model considers people as passive objects who must be cared for through the provision of welfare and support, as they are viewed as incapable of caring for themselves or having much say in their wellbeing. While some aspects of these models may have merit in that some medical intervention or some welfare support is needed, on their own they are patronising, offensive and disrespectful of individual human rights and the entrenchment of inequality created by society through ignorance.

Social and rights-based models

The social model proposes that the barriers that create inequality and enhance their experience of disability, are a result of society and its limited understanding of impairment. This situation results in the inability or unwillingness of society to accommodate for the differences between people with disabilities and those without, and an inability to grasp diversity within the group. The rights-based approach to disability wants people with disabilities to be empowered and capable individuals. Their rights to meaningful participation in social,



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cultural, economic and political life in society and their own development must be recognised, entrenched and protected. Socially created barriers must be removed and the right to protection, accommodation and freedom from discrimination must be embedded in policies, legislation and strategies.

Transcending barriers

With the powerful slogan of ‘nothing about us without us’ the movement has transcended stereotypical barriers such as gender, age, race, religion and culture to ensure that

the government of South Africa has enshrined rights into the Constitution and other Acts of Parliament since 1994. It has also moved the government to become party to several international and continental conventions and strategies, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the first and second Continental Plan of Action for the African Decade of Persons with Disabilities. Affiliation to these conventions, plans of action and other human rights protocols have strengthened the activities of the movement and given proponents

a foundation in international practices and law. This has enabled the movement to improve the awareness about disability, the diversity and the experience of disability and in particular the role that socially created barriers play in transforming an impairment into a disability. Consequently, it has been able to ensure that mainstreaming of and sensitisation to people with disabilities and their challenges are recognised in terms of employment and procurement policies and procedures in some public and private sector enterprises.

Future prospects

A review of recent reports on progress by individual researchers, research organisations and the Commission for Employment Equity suggests that there is still a long road ahead to achieving targets for the employment of people with disabilities, improving on reasonable accommodation in the workplace and access and full utilisation of all facilities open to the public, including cinemas, airports, shopping centres and shops.

The National Development Programme (NDP) aims to ensure that by 2020 and 2030, 7% and 10% respectively of people with disabilities are employed. However, this seems highly unlikely if attempts to reach the existing target of 2% are considered using biennial data from 2002 until 2016. Nationally, the employment of people with disabilities has never reached the 2% level. More disconcerting is the fact that their present share in the workplace is below that of 2002. In 2015, the share was 1.1% indicating a downward trend. If this is so, a lot of energy will be required to meet the proposed NDP targets.

Many organisations claim that they cannot find people with disabilities within their sectors to meet the 2% target. They argue that there are no people with disabilities with the necessary skills, experience or qualifications. Such an argument is perhaps a reflection of organisational unwillingness to adopt, finance, implement and commit to policies relating to reasonable accommodation and skills development – especially when so few people with disabilities are in senior positions. There also seems to be a lack of foresight in aligning job opportunities with their needs. On the other hand, some people do not realise that they have impairments and others choose not to disclose.

Universal design as the norm

In the late 1990s, there was an upsurge in the building of ramps and refurbishment of cloakrooms to accommodate wheelchair users and legislation was passed to ensure universal design of public buildings and facilities. However, the implementation of minimum standards in this regard seems to be an overly drawn-out process and regulations unenforced. Universal design should not be considered a challenge or an inconvenience. Gradually sloping ramps could replace stairs, gates or booms could replace turnstiles, better lighting would enable the use of sign language interpreters and assist those with specific mild to moderate visual impairment. Tele-coil or loop induction systems, compatible with virtually all hearing aids, should be the norm in any large room, be it a classroom, lecture theatre, airport lounge, banking hall, community hall, cinema or waiting room. Closed captioning and subtitling should be

mandatory for all television services, cinemas and other video displays. None of these features would impose on people without disabilities and may in fact be beneficial to them but they would increase the social inclusion and interaction of those with disabilities.

A parting shot

I have often wondered how many supermarkets, restaurants, transport facilities and recreation venues lose potential customers and revenue because they do not concern themselves with the needs of people with disabilities. How often have you avoided going to a shop because it appears dirty, or going to one that is small and the aisles are narrowly spaced or even eating at a restaurant where the tables are close together or staff and management seem rude or unhelpful? You avoid such places because they make you feel uncomfortable or unwelcome. Social barriers that reinforce disability have the same effect on people with disabilities and must be removed for them to fully contribute to and enjoy the benefits of society.

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