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## DISABILITY AND THE CHALLENGE OF EMPLOYMENT IN ZIMBABWE: A SOCIAL PROTECTION PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

*The role of employment to social protection is indisputable. This is so particularly in southern Africa where poverty and economic distress together with governance and other challenges make the provision of social assistance a pipe dream to the majority of the citizenry. This leaves social insurance as the dominant form of social security in Africa, with those in formal employment standing to benefit more than the unemployed majority who ache a living from invisible means. Inevitably, such a scenario triggers stiff competition for the few jobs most African economies are able to provide. This has dire repercussions for persons with disabilities who must not only contend with both what their impairment brings to bear in an ablest society but have also to struggle to convince employers and governments that they are capable and deserve space on the labour market. This paper examines the nexus between disability and unemployment before linking the two to social protection. Using a qualitative methodology, the paper examines the obstacles faced by persons with disabilities in gaining entry into the formal labour market. Findings indicated that persons with disabilities find it difficult to join the formal labour market, with those who get employed not able to rise through the ranks due to attitudinal factors. In addition, low levels of education coupled with reduced self esteem compound the situation. The paper finally discusses these findings within the context of social insurance.*

**KEY TERMS:** disability, unemployment, social security, poverty

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## INTRODUCTION

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. For a start, Social protection refers to policies and actions which enhance the capacity of poor and vulnerable people to escape from poverty and enable them to better manage risks and shocks (OECD, 2009: 1). Similarly, social protection has been widely used to refer to statutory or other efforts employed to assist people deal with Contingencies arise or otherwise supplement the incomes of those who experience particular needs or demands on their incomes.

In the daily usage of the term, social protection and social security have been used interchangeably. The same applies to this paper. However, readers are drawn to the debate surrounding these two terms. Voices from literature strongly suggest that social security is associated with the comprehensive and sophisticated social insurance and social assistance machinery of the developed world. As such, it is seen by some as inappropriate to the debate in much of the developing world, where higher levels of absolute poverty, combined with financially and institutionally weak states, pose a set of fundamentally different challenges (Norton et al, 2001:18). Alternatively, the term social protection is most preferred, precisely on account of its applicability to the socio-economic visciditudes of both developed and developing countries.

For social security, Income maintenance and income support are central to most operational definitions (Tang and Midgley, 2008: 22). Income maintenance and support is provided through the four major types of social security namely, social insurance, provident or savings funds, social assistance, employer mandates and social allowances. Social insurance is most often equated with social security.

The issue of unemployment has always been a source of poverty and social deprivation, with those not in employment being susceptible to economic shocks and natural disasters including drought. The rate of poverty and vulnerability could therefore largely be traced back to unemployment. Just because employment provides the great bulk of income for lower-income families, the opportunities provided by the labour market and self-employment earnings are likely to be pivotal to the potential success of exit from poverty, sometimes set in motion or at least aided by one or more social protection programmes.

For persons with disability, a 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 (Thomas, 2004:33).

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. It is not the intention of this paper to academically examine disability theory and the workings of the labour market. Rather, the paper is meant to expose the vulnerability of this social group when it comes to accessing sustainable social protection programmes. The paper therefore gives a brief methodology before delving into the presentation of findings. A discussion then follows where the social model of disability takes centre stage.

## METHODOLOGY

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. The paper believes in the strength of the qualitative methodology, that is, its capacity to illuminate human experiences through giving a voice to the target group thereby transforming it from objects to be acted upon to live and active subjects of the research process. (see Patton, 2002, Willis, 2007 and Riche, 2003). It is through the use of qualitative methodology that this paper has tried to situate the personal and living experiences of persons with disabilities in their struggle for sustainable social protection

In line with the qualitative methodology, the author conducted in-depth interviews with ten persons with albinism and visual impairments. In that regard, three women with albinism as well as three men and two women with visual impairment were interviewed.

In addition, the paper benefited from the views of three key informants interviewed to give their views on the employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. 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 ethical reasons, pseudonyms rather than real names were used, with such symbols as (alm1 and ALF1) to symbolise the first female participant with albinism and the first male participant with albinism respectively. Similarly, VIF1 and VIM1 were also used to depict the first female participant and the first male participant with visual impairments respectively.

## FINDINGS

In sync with the fundamental pillar of the social model of disability articulated above, VIF 2 attributes lack of acceptance by the mainstream society as a major cause of poverty and unemployment for persons with disabilities, particularly those with visual impairments. She narrates her story as follows; “to be frank I have been to three or four interviews in other banks. 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? Continuing with her testimony, VIF2 observed that her place of work depicts a clear example of what disability has in store for the bearers. Citing discrimination when it comes to promotion at the workplace, VIM2 narrated thus: “at my place of present employment, there are some people who rose through the ranks not because they possess higher qualifications than I do, rather, unlike me, they are able-bodied. As we speak, I have worked with close to seven switch board operators who come and then I teach them switch board operation. We work together and then a vacancy arises in another department they are considered in my stead. I have come to the conclusion that maybe bosses wouldn’t want me to prepare their tea yet I cook my own food at home but you wouldn’t know how people would view things”.

Similarly, VIM1 had served a public organisation as a lawyer without being considered for promotion simply on account of his visual impairment. VIM1 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. As a lawyer, VIM1 took his matter to the labour court where he got a ruling in his favour. However, such a ruling is difficult to enforce largely due to the prevailing culture of impunity entrenched, particularly in those with political leanings. He cited negative attitudes towards disability as the prime source of his troubles at the workplace.

On another note, ALF2 indicated that living with albinism in Zimbabwe was a curse. She 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 tendered their applications and were told to expect response 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. It was therefore in the interest of the supermarket to protect their business by employing persons whose character and appearance would not trigger customer flight.

On the same account, she wrapped up her discussion by emphasizing the need for society to embrace diversity and consider merit. For her, what is simply needed is that people must be concientised that persons with albinism were capable of doing everything that black persons are capable of doing. The only difference between them and the black people is simply that persons with albinism should not be heavily exposed to the sun.

Similarly, VIF1 lamented the fact that negative attitudes towards disability are even deep rooted in those institutions charged with protecting human rights, particularly those in civil society organizations. 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. She emphasized thus; “People in civil society organizations normally work under pressure. So the thinking is that since someone must read literature for us, we might not be efficient. What they do not know is that we can work under pressure because we are used to being read for. Being visually impaired forces us to have a sharp memory. We cannot afford to read a document over and over. We have compensatory senses. We do not easily forget like they do”.

Concluding her argument, VIF1 observed that the employment prospects of persons with disabilities remained blique, particularly if the attitudes within the civil society organizations persist. She added thus, 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.

Taking the debate to another level, submissions from participants revealed that sound and well informed policies usually come from felt rather than perceived needs. In other words, it takes a slave to understand and interpret the feelings of a slave. It takes an unfortunate man to interpret the feelings of his unfortunate brother.

Emphasizing this point with particular reference to educational policy, ALF3 gave as an example the importance of having a representative with albinism at the echelons of the bureaucracy for the ministry of education. "I think that if there is a person with albinism within the ministry of education, it would be easy for the examination body to understand that such a social group needs special treatment during examinations. Such special considerations include extra time and a question paper with a bigger font because as persons with albinism, we do have a short sight. Such challenges can only be understood by people experiencing the same situation. Failure to recognize the special needs of persons with albinism during examinations has resulted in many such people being disadvantaged and failing to harness their academic potential".

In pursuit of the same argument, ALF3 further contended that the failure of children with albinism to achieve academically starts well before the examination itself. She contends that the practice of hot sitting common to most rural and urban schools is a great disadvantage to children with albinism who cannot withstand excessive heat from the sun. In the absence of a representative within the ministry of education, let alone in parliament, none is there to advocate for a policy protecting such children against being subjected to hot sitting. Even when it comes to school uniform, none in this country has ever raised the issue 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 and poor educational qualifications, making them good candidates for national statistics on those out of employment.

Similarly, 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. VIM 2 indicated that not all examination centres accommodate persons with visual impairment under the pretext that they need Brailled question papers and other specialized equipment. He proceeded to say that this has even resulted in many persons with visual impairment in particular not able to attend school. He indicated that the Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) drafted an instrument which requires school heads to give a notice that they have a person with visual impairment who wants to write at their school. yet the registration application form that a candidate completes as part of the registration process has got a section that asks whether the candidate in question has got a disability requiring special question papers including Braille and large print. This requirement complicates matters for those persons with visual impairments who must register for examinations at designated schools. The burden comes hard on those intending to supplement failed subjects. In addition, this has seen candidates having to travel hundreds of kilometers in search for a special school. One imagines a situation whereby a candidate domiciled in Harare having to go to masvingo or marondera to register to write an examination.

Given the challenges associated with visual impairment that include poverty and sometimes limited mobility, such institutional mechanisms 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.

In view of such a state of affairs, government and other cooperating partners were urged to provide adequate educational opportunities to persons with disabilities so that they become assertive and resolute especially when it comes to those matters that affect them.

Without having to wait for government and other partners to take the lead, ALF1 revealed that she has taken it upon herself to cultivate and foster a sense of positive self-concept especially to persons with albinism at the same time encouraging them to keep on pressing for their recognition in society.

Giving her contribution to the discussion, one key informant suggested that low self-esteem tends to breed a sense of apathy and self resignation. The key informant from civil society organizations revealed that there is general sense of apathy induced by lack of self-worth. "I think the very first thing to do is to educate people with disabilities on the importance of fighting for their rights. This should be done through advocating for inclusive policies.

Adding his voice to the issues of negative attitudes towards disability as the chief cause of poverty, one key informant from a prominent trade union identified two main reasons for discrimination. He indicated that "there is an aspect of cost involved especially on the part of employers, or the capitalist. The prime motive of all capitalists is to maximizing profit by whatever means necessary".

To emphasise his point, The trade unionist gave an example of his offices located on the ninth floor. He said; "a typical example is this building, If you are to ask the owner to modify this building such that it can accommodate certain people with disabilities, the likely response is that there is no money. Such adjustments are too expensive. This is particularly so despite the fact that tenants pay rent every month.

The same applies if we go to companies and say to them can you buy certain equipment for use by their disabled employees, they don't want because it eats into their profits. So the whole issue revolves around attitude and availability of resources.

Putting a lid on the issue of attitudes and employment, the key informant indicated that the problem starts within the family where a child with a disability is borne. On this note, he observed that in most cases, children with disabilities are not even sent to school. They are even not given opportunities to perform certain domestic chores and are even excluded from critical family deliberations.

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. She however lamented the exclusion of persons with disabilities saying that they should never be left out. “I can just say they shouldn’t be left out they should also be initiative. They approach the relevant ministries or relevant institutions they should lobby for them to be heard. We know that they exist but they should come out themselves and make people aware that they also need those services and they are also doing something productive such as running projects including poultry projects. They also need to be considered at par with any other normal Zimbabwean”.

## DISCUSSION

The place of employment in the promotion and preservation of the dignity and worth of every human being is beyond doubt. The denial of employment opportunities by both the public and private sectors on account of perceived incapacities books these people a permanent seat on the train of poverty.

As accounts from the above participants show, disability is to some a badge of inferiority and yet to others a financial liability. Such a finding is in line with observations put forth by such scholars as Genesi (1997) who blames society for seeing a disability before looking at the potential of the individual job seeker. According to Genesi, (2007) “When disability is seen as the largest component of a person, much of what is unique and “human” about him or her will be obscured. When needs and deficits are what we see, we only see what that person cannot do” (page 339).

Another prominent issue raised by participants was that disability is a hair raising state of being that not everyone in society is expected to cope with. This squarely validates the contention advanced by the social model of disability that disability is a restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization that takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excluding them from the mainstream of social activities (Drake, 1999: 13).

From the above narratives, persons with disabilities suffer from poverty and powerlessness due mainly to prevailing social attitudes. Such a state of affairs corroborates the argument advanced by Narayan (2008:1) that a country’s economic development is embedded in its social organization, and addressing structural inequities requires not only economic changes but also societal transformation.” In other words, for persons with disabilities to benefit from the national economic policies and programmes, the social and attitudinal barriers to participation need to be removed first. This scenario led Mtetwa (2012) to bemoan “the dilemma of social difference”. Admittedly, all societies are built from *social groups* rather than individuals, and these groups determine attitudes, beliefs, identities and values, as well as access to resources and opportunities – and ultimately access to power.

Even though Lack of self-esteem and confidence was cited by many participants as contributing to poverty and lack of innovation. There is however a belief that such is the result of continued social and economic exclusion rather than innate personal inadequacies. In line with the social model of disability, participants placed the blame squarely on society and its institutions and values rather than on the personal weaknesses of persons with disabilities themselves. The idea that the state of social marginalization and humiliation breeds a sense of worthlessness is however not peculiar to this study. Such disability scholars as Moris (1991) have put much emphasis on the issue. In her own analysis, Moris came to the conclusion that: “It is not only physical limitations that restrict us to our homes and those whom we know. It is the knowledge that each entry into the public world will be dominated by stares, by condescension, by pity and by hostility” (Morris 1991: 25).

No matter what the reason might be, the bottom line remains that both persons with albinism and those with visual impairment suffer from low self-esteem. They even feel that they are not fit enough for self liberation and empowerment.

The Testimonies from participants are a clear pointer towards the core argument of the social model of disability that disability is more of a structural than a physiological phenomenon. As its chief proponent puts it, the social model is “an attempt to switch the focus away from the functional limitations of individuals with an impairment on to the problems caused by disabling environments, barriers and cultures” ( Oliver, 2004: 23). Following from the social model point of view, the reason why VIF2 is failing to secure promotion at work despite her abilities is truly a function of social barriers erected to bar her upward mobility rather than any innate or personal deficiencies borne out of her visual impairment. By the same token, the plight of VIM1 being refused promotion at work and yet his counterpart within the same organization takes away the problem from the personal

inadequacies of the individual affected onto the perceptions and attitudes of immediate bosses. 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.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL PROTECTION**

As the above discussion has shown, the role of employment to social protection is not in doubt. This leaves those not in employment more or less without protection thereby compromising their quality of life. Employment policies are therefore central to poverty alleviation, since the level and quality of employment is a basic determinant of national income and its distribution. There is compelling evidence that the main source of income for 80–90 percent of families in most countries is their labour (Naudé and Santos-Paulino, 2010). 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. 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.

### **CONCLUSION**

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.

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