

## **The Empowerment of Persons with Special Needs for Independent Living in a Developing Nation**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Over the years, exceptional persons have contributed immensely to national development. Their inputs have been felt or noticed in the areas of education, health, commerce, community service, music, industry, sports and social development, law and diplomacy, politics and the like. This paper discusses the concept and nature of empowerment, goals and strategies for empowering persons with special needs, and factors militating against their empowerment in Nigeria. Finally, some fundamental recommendations for effective empowerment of persons with special needs for independent living are suggested. Developing nations should adopt the strategies towards the improvement of the lot of persons with special needs as obtains in advanced countries of the world.

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Statistical estimations have shown that there are about six hundred million persons with special needs world wide and two-thirds of them live in developing countries. The World Bank Benchmark shows that 10% of a country's population has disabilities. Based on this, therefore, Nigeria's current population of 13.7 million could be said to have disabilities (Guteng, 2005).

Around the world, there is a premise that disability and unemployment for persons with disability go hand in hand. In most countries that have done population analyses, we get the impression that there are more people with disability out of work than at work, which may not be unconnected with lack of adequate empowerment and appropriate interventions in terms of job preparation, job provision, job placement and welfare services for independent living.

The contributions of persons with special needs the world over cannot be in doubt. All they need is empowerment. This presentation looks at the concept and goals of empowerment, as well as the processes and factors militating against it in Nigeria. Some fundamental recommendations are raised towards their effective empowerment for independent living.

### **CONTRIBUTIONS OF PERSONS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF AND SOCIETY:**

Globally, exceptional persons have contributed significantly to the development and upliftment of communities and nations, Nigeria inclusive. The contributions authenticate the claim that if persons with special needs are given the needed empowerment – necessary training working tools, encouragement and the needed conducive environment to operate - they too can contribute immensely to the progress of the society. There are indications that poverty reduction is the most

difficult challenge facing Nigeria and its citizens. It is also said to be the major hurdle that must be overcome in the pursuit of the suitable socio-economic growth capable of empowering the citizenry and the total emancipation of special needs individuals.

The popular slogan commonly used in special education that "there is ability in disability" lends credence to the assertion that exceptional persons are capable of contributing to the development of their societies and nations. In line with the above claim, Abang (1981: 7) opined that:

In many parts of the world, handicapped persons are no longer looked upon as people who could be silenced by dropping a penny or two in their coin boxes. On the contrary, they are looked upon as individuals who have contributions to make to the upkeep of the community. This high expectation has given persons with special needs high morale and has demonstrated that they can, indeed, contribute tremendously to society.

On the global scene, Homer the Greek Epic poet and author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and John Milton (1608 – 1611) English Puritan poet and author of *Paradise Lost and Paradise Gained* were both blind persons. Stevie Wonder of the USA, a musician of international repute was blind.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, though confined to the wheelchair as a result of poliomyelitis, served his country as President for 12 years, the longest ever, and led the American people out of the worst economic depression (1929) of all times in his country, and to victory in the 2nd World War (1939 – 1945). George Wallace who became physically handicapped and consequently confined to a wheelchair as a result of an assassin's bullets, was twice Governor of the Alabama, USA and even had an attempt on the presidency, though he lost. Hawking who suffered for 22 years from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a progressively debilitating and ultimately fatal nerve disease that strips its victim of the ability to walk talk and eventually even to move a finger. Confined to a wheelchair for 12yrs and 6 weeks. Later, he lost ability to speak altogether. Yet he became the world's greatest theoretical physicist for his profound contributions to science (Lere, 1996).

Helen Keller who was deaf, blind and dumb, wrote many books, poems and composed inspirational songs.

At the home front (Nigeria), therefore, many examples abound. In Benue State, the secretary to the then Governor of the state, George Akume, is a blind man. Prince Adelabu and Mr. Akande, though physically impaired are Principal and Vice Principal, respectively, of Moniya Rehabilitation Center, Moniya, in Ibadan. Having learnt some vocational skills, exceptional persons produce canes, baskets, trays, chairs, tables, shoes and beautiful can toys. They also make improvised toy instructional materials like motors, radios, television sets and effigies of men and women used for effective teaching. Some at the local levels take to tailoring, shoe making, weaving, poultry, rabbitry, telephone operation, basket weaving, tie and dye, etc.

Chief Okubanjo was the former Chairman of the National Advisory Council for the Blind in Nigeria. He built several blocks of classrooms for St. Marks Anglican School and Muslim Primary School in Ijebu – Igbo and donated 53 tricycles to aid the mobility of physically impaired persons in Ogun state.

Mrs. Grace Foluke Idowu, despite her physical impairment due to spinal cord injury, was the chief executive of Independent Living for People with Disabilities, a notable charitable organization, rendering educative, informative, and support services to persons with impairments.

At the first Pan African Games for the Disabled held in Cairo, Egypt in 1991, Eka Ekpe Okon from the Federal. School, Ikeja, Lagos and Godwin Uno of the same school came first and second, respectively, in 100 meters – for Nigeria. In 200 meters, Modina Shittu from Lagos secured first and second positions, respectively (Fedeiye, 2006).

Mr. Stephen Adewumi a lawyer of substance was a resource person to Mobil Company of Nigeria in the late 1990s, though blind.

Prof. Bitrus Gani of the ABU Teaching Hospital, a renowned physiotherapist nationally and internationally, is a blind man.

Senator Dangin, though confined to a wheelchair, is a renowned politician in Plateau State and a one time Senator of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Professors E. Ojile, a renowned Professor in the field of hearing impairment, is a lecturer with the University of Jos, Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, is himself hearing-impaired.

Chief Osunkiesi worked in a number of Ministries including the Ministries of Education and Economic Development. He rose to the rank of Assistant Director in charge of Special Education in the Federal Ministry of Education before he retired in 1987 (Abosi 1998 & Fedeiye, 2006).. He was very much responsible for the general development of Special Education in Nigeria. He also presented a memorandum leading to the establishment of the Federal Advanced Teachers College, now known as Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo. He worked relentlessly for the integration of Elements of Special Education into the curriculum of such institutions throughout the country, Nigeria.

Dr. P.O Mba of great memory has been referred to as "Father of Special Education in Nigeria". Though hearing-impaired, he was the first deaf Nigerian scholar to obtain a doctorate degree. He contributed substantially to the enhancement of Special Education. In Nigeria, he single handedly championed the education and welfare of exceptional Nigerians, particularly the hearing-impaired. He favoured the use of total communication as a medium of instruction for the deaf.

The list is endless, all over the world. These achievements have been made possible as a result of effective, efficient empowerment in the appropriate fields of endeavour.

### **THE CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT**

According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, empowerment refers to a form of assertiveness training to someone. And the idea of empowering persons with special needs arises in the quest of a reform based on the strategy of the economic system of the country. The main ideas are clear and focused: empowerment, wealth creation, employment generation and poverty reduction. In other words empowerment here could be seen as a means of training the disabled person on how to become self reliant and independent.

A former American President, Bill Clinton (1993) said:

Empowerment has become an increasingly popular term in disability and rehabilitation field. It has been used in a variety of context, and it has been given a variety of meanings. Empowerment is almost always viewed as something positive to be aspired to, advocated and attained.

Quoting Harp (1994), Lere (2006) viewed empowerment of individuals with special needs as the possession of some degree of power over ones own life and the conditions that affect life as is generally possessed by people without disabilities. He therefore views empowerment as occurring at each of fours levels, as follows:

- Freedom of choice regarding services;
- Influence over the operation and structure of service provision;
- Participation in system-wide human service planning; and
- Participation in decision-making at the community level.

### **THE GOALS FOR EMPOWERING PERSONS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS:**

To enable persons with special needs have something doing

To stop such persons from becoming beggars

To enable them have a share in the economy of the nation

To enable them contribute in the economic development of the nation

To bring up the disabled persons educationally, socially and economically

To aid the disabled achieve self-sufficiency, independence, effectiveness and lasting economic adjustment

To extricate the disabled persons from the pit of anguish due to natural, biological and physical misfortunes

To enable the disabled persons raise families of their own

To provide awareness to the disabled persons that job participation can provide and cater for their entire well being

To bring back the disabled persons from the economic isolation and segregation imposed on them by the so-called normal persons

To safe-guard disabled persons from normal persons' devaluation and economic frustration.

## **FACTORS MILITATING AGAINST THE EMPOWERMENT OF THE SPECIAL NEEDS PERSONS**

- Lack of funds – It is worthy of note that most of the special needs persons who must have acquired the training in vocational skills, lack access to obtaining loans.
- Negative attitude – Most members of the society still show negative attitude towards the special needs persons.
- Low self-esteem/concept – Most special needs persons have a poor concept about themselves.
- The absence of legislation to control the discriminatory syndrome against the special needs persons is a great concern.
- Lack of information
- Lack of trained personnel to help facilitate the easy implementation of the various programmes is a barrier.
- Non – implementation of the policies constitutes a problem too.
- Embezzlements of funds.
- Misplacement of priority.

## **STRATEGIES FOR EMPOWERING SPECIAL NEEDS PERSONS**

### **(A). ASSESSMENT FOR APPROPRIATE INTERVENTION**

Assessment is an important aspect of vocational rehabilitation programme for job analysis and placement. It is desirable that prior to the training services the trainees are assessed to determine their eligibility. Academically, assessment provides for the determination of the nature and severity of the disability and appropriate intervention strategies to be required. In rehabilitation, the assessment procedure offers information as to the client's ways and mode of training for competitive, sheltered or homebound types of placements/employment. It further helps to reveal the potential ability, case history, educational background, onset of disability and the entire personality and the behaviour of each client. In addition, it offers opportunities to identify adjustment problems, working habit and attitudes. According to Lere (2006), diagnostic evaluation of the clients ascertains the extent of the disability and the imposed limitation. It enables experts to make realistic prediction on clients' capability level of performance.

### **B. COUNSELLING THE DISABLED AND PARENTS**

For the effective delivery of education and other services for persons with special needs in Nigeria, counseling service for both parents and their children with special needs is highly desirable.

#### **(i) Counseling the parent:**

Venneh & Torikpa (2006) comment that:

Despite the recent improvement in the provision of services for our young handicapped children, parents still find themselves without adequate knowledge and information regarding the handicapping conditions their children are suffering from. They find themselves ill-equipped with the information regarding how they can effectively manage the children.

It is very obvious that parents have difficulty in taking appropriate decisions on how they could refer their handicapped children for diagnostic testing, selecting appropriate educational placements and careers for their children. These, therefore, tend to suggest that parents of the handicapped children in Nigeria need encouragement and appropriate counseling.

(ii). **Counseling the disabled themselves:**

Like the parents, the presence of a handicapping condition in an individual can negatively affect both the social and psychological development of the individual child concerned. This can as well affect the overall adjustment to any empowerment process. They would therefore require, basically, information, personal and career counseling approaches.

**(C) TRAINING FOR APPROPRIATE PLACEMENT:**

The training of persons with special needs for empowerment and appropriate job placement should, where possible, enable them to carry on an economic activity in which they can use their vocational qualifications. For this purpose, Lere (2006) has outlined that the training should be:

provided wherever possible and appropriate, in the occupation of the client continued until the disabled person has acquired the skill necessary for working normally on an equal basis with non-disabled workers if he/she is capable of doing so

- jointly coordinated with selective placement after medical service in an occupation in which the person performing the relevant work is affected
- wherever possible, disabled persons should receive training with and under the same conditions as non-disabled persons
- wherever possible and appropriate, these services should include:
  - a. Schools and training centers, residential or otherwise
  - b. Special short-term and long term training courses for specific occupations;
  - c. Courses to increase the skills of disabled persons
- Measures should be taken to encourage employers to provide training, financial, technical, medical or vocational assistance to the trainees.
- Special services should be set up or developed By nature or severity of their disabilities, they cannot be trained in the company of non-disabled persons
- Measures should be taken to make special arrangements for the placement of the disabled persons who are not working after the training.

**(D) PROVISION OF ASSISTIVE DEVICES:**

According to Fait (1978), assistive devices apply to a variety of contrivances that provide and assist, substitute for or facilitate the movement of the limbs. These devices range in complexity, from simple cane to quad canes, crutches, walkers, pick-up walker, wheelchairs, prosthesis, feeders, shoulder suspension device, back braces, scooter boards. Lere (2005) opines that knowledge of the functions of the specific devices help in understanding the environmental problems imposed by the

disabilities, and in understanding the way and extent to which the devices help to overcome the problems.

#### **(E). ENFORCEMENT OF LEGISLATIVE MANDATES**

Legislative bills have been passed at the National, States and local government areas by the respective legislative houses, and what is absent is the enforcement of the laws passed. The National Policy on Education (1981), though not a law, was not silent on the employment of persons with special needs. It states that 2% employment opportunities in Nigeria be reserved for such categories of individuals; as well as free education and free medication.

Research reports revealed that:

There is no strict compliance to the 2% employment provision for such persons. The aspect of free education and medication are not being properly addressed as expected. The problems faced with architectural barriers are not being adequately addressed. Discrimination due to disability has been a daily practice. Equalization of opportunities should be better addressed.

Internationally, the following examples could be cited:

The American's PL 94 – 142 of 1975 and many other efforts have provided a lot of safe-guards for both the disabled and their parents

In Britain, the Employment Act 1944 & 1953 recognized that the Department of Employment be responsible for organizing specialized placements.

Quota system, employment was enforced. Under this employers with 20 or more employees had an obligation to give at least 3% to registered disabled persons.

Firms that failed to comply with this quota system were prohibited from employing non – disabled persons, unless a permit to do so was obtained.

In Japan and Germany, such laws provided that private organizations that observed the employment quota system had their annual tax assessment reviewed downward.

In Germany, as in Britain, firms employing more than 20 persons were required to satisfy the quota requirement of not less than six handicapped persons. Employers were required to modify buildings, machines and tools for severely handicapped persons, etc.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Fundamentally, persons with special needs are human beings with equal value and dignity, equal rights and privileges as their non-disabled counterparts. They have the potential to learn, prosper and equally live an independent, meaningful and contributing life in the society. Persons with special needs in this current consideration require understanding and adjustments from other members of the wider society, both in attitude and in the arrangement of the physical environment. This will surely enable them lead a normal/near normal working, independent, contributory life in the community and the nation at large (Lere, 2005).

While those profoundly disabled are appropriately assisted by government, non governmental organizations, community based programmes and spirited individuals,

those in active service would need understanding, cooperation, positive attitude, zero tolerance and fairness, principle of consideration and equality of opportunities. When these variables are put in place, persons with special needs will not only be said to be empowered but their independent existence will be practically seen and appreciated by all and sundry.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have been advanced for effective empowerment of persons with disability for independent living. A national census of persons with disability in the country should be conducted by type, gender, age, category, qualification, state, location, severity. Assessment of each condition be undertaken to determine the severity and services to be provided.

For those to benefit from educational services, it should be made free and compulsory at all levels.

The severity and profoundly disabled population should receive training in independent daily living skills and taken care of totally by government.

Ministries, departments, companies/organizations should make available the lists of job opportunities for qualified persons with disability to choose from.

Strong legislative provisions should be made on free education, free medication and welfare schemes for persons with disability. Defaulters of such legislative provisions/laws should be sanctioned appropriately.

Government should support the establishment of community based Rehabilitation Centers.

Counseling services should be provided for persons with disability and their parents. There should be no discrimination in their education/training, employment and welfare provision.

Assistive devices / prostheses should be provided for those who need them at no cost.

The Ministries of Social Welfare, Labour and Productivity should be seen to be actively involved in employment/welfare provisions.

Commercial institutions/banks should make loan facilities available to persons with disability by charging minimal or no interests.

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