



OPPORTUNITIES AND ISSUES IN EMPOWERING DIFFERENTLY- ABLED PEOPLE INTO PRODUCTIVITY: A STUDY BASED ON AMPARA DISTRICT, SRI LANKA

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Abstract

Disability is a normal phenomenon in the sense that it exists in all societies, affecting predictable and identifiable proportions of each population. Disability activities are economic activities, which generate economic output and income just like other economic activities. Nevertheless, expenditures on disability are typically viewed as constituting an economic burden. This likely stems from the fact that most expenditures on disability have traditionally come either from government budgets, making them burdensome to taxpayers. Incorporating disabled people into the labor force in a productive manner is a challenging but important step. Empowerment is all about giving official authority to an individual to do something by making someone stronger and more confident. This research has attempted to study the available opportunities to empower disables and to identify the issues which are significant threat to empowering disables which in turn increase the cost of families with disabled persons and government expenditure to protect these disabled persons.

Keywords; Disability, Economic activities, Empowerment Issues, Labor force

Introduction

Disabled people are often found among “the poorest of the poor” and in a developing country like Sri Lanka, they face discrimination in every level of the society. Historically, disable people were excluded from mainstream society and development. Poverty is both a cause and consequence of disability and a majority of disabled people find their impairment affects their

chances of attending school, working for a better living, enjoying life and participating as equals in social life (S. Safra, 2010). Integrating disabled people into the labor force in a productive manner is a challenging but important step. The main responsibility for this lies with the Government, which has started to move forward in Ampara district.

Ampara is one of the districts situated in the South Eastern Coast of the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka has had the misfortune of facing war and many disasters in the past which created a severe impact on its people. In 2001, there were total of 8462 disabled people in Ampara district which includes disability in seeing, disability in hearing and speaking, disability in hands, disability in legs, mental disability and others. According to 2012 statistics data, it is approximately 45390 which is 7.8 percent of the population in the Ampara district have difficulties in seeing, hearing, walking, communication, cognition and self care.

Many initiatives are undertaken for the empowerment of people with disabilities in the Ampara District of Sri Lanka. However, the achievement of the goals of such programs are still questionable due to some issues associated with and the factors which affect the efficiency and effectiveness of those disability empowerment programs. This paper examines the opportunities available to empower the differently abled people in Amparta district and the issues which hinder the efficient utilization of these opportunities to empower the differently abled people in the Ampara District.

Literature Review.

Disability and the Economic Cost of Disability

The legal definition of disability in Sri Lanka is described in the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act. No 28 of 1996. A “person with disability means any person who, as a result of any deficiency in his/her physical or mental capabilities, whether congenital or not, is unable by himself to ensure for himself, wholly or partly, the necessities of life”. This definition is a reasonably broad one, encompassing both medical and socio-economic aspects of disability. (Ministry of Social Services, 2003)

A disability may occur during a person’s lifetime or exist from birth. The WHO define it as a “restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the

manner or within the range of considered normal for a human being” - a functional limitation or activity restriction by an impairment.

Impairment would mean “any loss or abnormality caused of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function (UN, 2003) such as loss of limb, organ or other body structure, as well as defects or loss of a mental function. Such impairment may include physical, sensory and cognitive or intellectual impairment. Mental disorders, such as psychiatric or psychosocial disability or various types of diseases such as TB, HIV, stroke, spinal cord injuries, Arthritis, Alzheimer may be also considered as disabilities. (K. Wijyaratnam,2011). The major causes of these impairment in Sri Lanka are war, Natural disasters, Malnutrition, Accidents and involvement in high risk employment.

There are also high levels of mental illness, including war-induced posttraumatic stress disorder. Fernandopulle (2002) argued that a more far-reaching approach to mental health is required, taking into account the consequences of living with years of civil and military conflict. It is estimated that 27 percent of the population in conflict areas in the north eastern province experience severe posttraumatic stress impairments (Asian Development Bank, 2005).

The definition of ‘disabled person’ according to the Declaration on the Rights of the Disabled Persons proclaimed by the United Nations Assembly on December 9, 1975 is: “any person unable to ensure by himself, wholly or partially, the necessities of a normal individual and/or social life, as a result of deficiency, either congenital or not, in his or her physical or mental capabilities.”

The Economic Costs Of Disability

Disability tends to reduce economic output by reducing or eliminating the economic contributions of certain members of society, particularly people with disabilities and their family members and close friends. The amount by which economic output is reduced in this way constitutes the net economic cost of disability. Disability activities are economic activities, which generate economic output and income just like other economic activities. Nevertheless, expenditures on disability are typically viewed as constituting an economic burden. This likely stems from the fact that most expenditures on disability have traditionally

come either from government budgets, making them burdensome to taxpayers, or charitable remittances, making them charity, which necessarily implies a burden (Metts, 2004).

Also, disability services have traditionally been viewed, not as investments in people with disabilities for which society should expect a return, but as unavoidable costs for their care. This reduces the economic potential of disability activities, turning what should be investments into burdensome expenditures. Excluding disabled people from the world of work may cost countries 1 to 7 percent of GDP, according to ILO estimates.

Persons with disabilities in Sri Lanka are entitled to special grants from the government, Government of Sri Lanka provides Rs. 250,000.00 for construction of a new house, Rs. 15,000.00 for access road with the ramp and Rs. 20,000.00 for toilet accessibility as a accessibility facilities for houses, self-employment assistance maximum Rs. 25,000.00, Medical assistance for surgery maximum Rs. 20,000.00, to purchase medicine and travelling expenses paid maximum Rs. 20,000.00, Payment of Rs. 3,000.00 under Mahinda Chintana program for families with disable person with monthly income below Rs. 3,000.00. in addition to all these financial assistance the government of Sri Lanka provides Assistive devices such as tricycle, wheel chair, elbow, commode wheel chair, hearing aid, crutches, spectacles and conducts courses for persons with disability in order to empower the persons with disability and to improve their status quo in the society.

The concept ‘empowerment’

The verb “*empower*” is explained both by the Oxford Dictionary and the Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary as ‘giving official authority to an individual to do something and/or promoting the self-actualization or influence of someone by making someone stronger and more confident.’ This dichotomy in the concept of empowerment is described by many other investigators. Gibson (1991), who explained that the concept of empowerment consists of an external and internal component: the individual responsibility to control one’s own life and the broader responsibility of the institutions, organizations or society that enable people to take responsibility for their own life.

According to Zimmermen (2000). The construct of empowerment can be analyzed at the organizational, community and individual level. Analyzing empowerment at the organizational level means the investigation of arrangements to provide individuals with

opportunities to exert control, and of organizational effectiveness in service delivery and the policy process. At the community level of analysis, empowerment refers to the context in which organizations and individuals interact to enhance community living, and ensure that their communities address local needs and concerns. The individual level of analysis consists of three components. First, the intrapersonal component refers to how people think about their capacity to influence social and political systems important to them. This component treats empowerment as a personality variable that encompasses psychological processes such as perceived control, self-efficacy, sense of community and perceived competence. Second, the behavioral component refers to specific actions to exercise influence through participation in organizations and activities. Third, the interactional component includes knowledge about needed resources and problem-solving skills.

Legal provisions for protecting and empowering differently-abled

In Sri Lanka, disability is mainly a result of war, natural disasters, aging populations, and large numbers of people undertaking high-risk work. Over an 11-year period, the Sri Lankan government has passed a raft of legislation and policies aimed at fostering the participation of disabled people in civil society. ESCAT Lanka has identified such changes in Sri Lankan legal and policy frameworks are part of the country's ongoing alignment with the United Nations Standard Rules on Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993) and United Nations International Convention on the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities (2006, GA/A/61/6111).

There has been slow and steady progress of legislation to recognize and support people with disabilities in Sri Lanka. These are the key legislative instruments relevant to disabled people:

Reference to equal rights in the Constitution - Under Article 12 of the Sri Lankan Constitution that deals with fundamental rights, in the anti-discrimination Clauses (2) and (3), people with disabilities are not mentioned as a separate group. They are recognized as being within clause (1), which states that "All persons are equal before the law and are entitled to the equal protection of the Law."

1988 Public Administration Circular No. 27/88 dated 18th August – 3% of vacancies in public services and public companies should be filled by people with disabilities "possessing

requisite qualifications and whose disabilities would not be a hindrance to the performance of duties"

1992 Trust Fund Act for the Rehabilitation of the Visually Handicapped provides for education and training opportunities; financial assistance; housing provision and welfare schemes; marketing of products made by people with visual impairments; action to eliminate conditions which prevent gaining of equal rights and opportunities.

1996 Right of persons with Disabilities Act No. 28 established the National Council and the National Secretariat for Persons with Disabilities.

1996 Social Security Board Act 17 provides for a pension and insurance for people with disabilities in the case of accidents or old age.

1996 National Health Policy provides for the improvement of the quality of life: reducing preventable diseases, running health programs on disability and health measures to prevent disability. Also provides for early childhood development of children with disabilities in rehabilitation; and Development Centers with individual services, pre-schools, house visits, assistance devices, parental counselling and awareness for children suffering from acute and chronic mental illnesses.

1997 General Educational Reforms introduced the inclusion of children who have disabilities in the ordinary classroom (an approach which started in the early 1970s). Changes in teaching, the curriculum, counselling, career guidance, school-based management and new strategies for teacher education, were all promoted to benefit children who have disabilities within inclusive education. Child assessment on entry to and continuously through primary school also helps to identify children with disability.

1999 Ranaviru Seva Act provides for the care and rehabilitation of members of the armed forces and police force who have become disabled in the line of duty.

2003 National Disability Policy provides the most comprehensive and progressive and holistic framework in Sri Lanka to date, for equality and opportunity for people with disabilities. This policy promotes community-based rehabilitation (CBR) and partnership with NGOs.

Problem Statement of the Study

Many of the disadvantaged are hidden from society - they shy away because a large section of the society shuns them. Social exclusion of persons with disabilities lies at the core of the problem often defining the path the people take and treated, to how they are perceived and treated (Wijayaratnam, 2011). A large minority group struggling with difficulties in gaining control of their life and claiming their rights is the group of people with disabilities. Controlling the factors affecting their lives may be difficult due to physical or psychological constraints (Bakker & Brakel,2012).

Across the world employment for disabled persons is a problem. In low-income countries of the world 58.6 percent of the male population is employed while 71.2 percent of the non-disabled male population is employed. Among females, 20.1 per cent of the disabled population is employed (Dineshi,2012). Almost all jobs can be performed productively by someone with a disability, and given the right environment, most people with disabilities can be productive.

According to the records from the Department of Social Services- Eastern Province , District office Ampara, there are 6803 differently abled people are identified, which includes 1016 are visual, 1294 are hearing and speech, 1127 are mentally handicapped, 2220 are movability while the other 1146 have other form of disabilities. Most of the disable people identified are getting special grants from government which costs huge amount of money. Unemployment of disable people in the Ampara district increases the cost of living of families as well as the cost of government grants, instead, if this segment is empowered and involved in any income generating activities which in turn will help the families to improve their economic condition and thus will help to reduce the cost of government.

Therefore, this research is to study the issues and opportunities in empowering differently abled into productivity by converting government aids as an investment to in education and vocational training to make disables contributing to national economy in Ampara District. This research focuses on the emerging opportunities and threats when empowering differently abled into productivity and how to convert differently abled people in the Ampara district into productivity.

Objective of the Research

Around 6803 people of the total population in Ampara District is fully disabled while there are more than 40000 people suffer from difficulties like seeing, hearing, speaking, walking and mental health. It is the general belief that, with them, the ratio of dependents would increase. The government should interfere to protect their identity, equal status and privileges by making them to provide an active contribution to the national labor force. Many of the disabled persons are trying to live a dependent life. A person's environment has a huge impact on the experience and extent of disability (Dineshi, 2012). The question still remains as to whether we as a community have identified the value of the differently-abled population's contribution. It is not only the acceptance but making an environment friendly for the differently abled or disabled persons to succeed to the maximum to his abilities. It is possible to minimize unemployment among this group by searching employment opportunities in the private sector and give them vocational training accordingly. By this it is possible to develop the independence, of these people in their personnel life as well as their social life. The main objective of this study is to investigate the opportunities and issues in empowering differently abled in to productivity.

Research Methodology

Population, Sampling and Data collection

In this research, the data were collected as secondary as well as primary. Secondary data were collected from officials such as District Social Service Secretariat, NGO's records, books, publications, journal articles, e-sources, previously conducted research and reports, and other relevant documents.

The population refers to the entire group of people, events or things of interest that the researcher wishes to investigate. It is the group of people, events or things of interest for which the researcher wants to make inference (Sekeran and Bougie, 2013). In this research the total population disabled people in the Ampara district was considered as population. According to the available information, it is estimated that 6803 people live in Ampara district in the year 2012, but the actual population during the survey period is not known and the population statistics was not available as it was not done. 100 members of disabled people were selected based on convenience sampling techniques because of the difficulties in meeting this people. This includes people with movability and hearing disabilities, other

forms disabilities such as visual and speech were not included due to the difficulties in collecting information from them. In addition to that 01 District social service officer and 03 officials from the non-government organizations conducting disability empowerment programs in the Ampara District were interviewed to collect the primary data. Collected data were analyzed using Microsoft excel.

Data Analysis

Descriptive Statistics for Demographic Factors

The research focused on some background variables of respondents such as gender, age, marital status, employment status, and monthly income to get some insights of the sample in terms of this research. Out of the 100 respondents, almost 87% of the disabled were males and 13% were females. Majority of the disadvantaged average age was in between 31-40 years counting of 30% of total and 37% of disadvantaged people involve in income generating activities while the remaining 63% are dependant and has no income, 11% of the people income falls in between Rs. 20,000 - Rs. 30,000. Around 67% of the disables aware of the legal provisions available for protecting and empowering them while 89% of the disadvantaged are receiving financial assistance form the government and the rest of the 11% feel shy to get it and fully depend on their families.

Findings and Conclusion

Based on the analysis of data collected from disabled people, District social service officer and officials from non-governmental organizations. The findings can be categorized into opportunities to empower differently abled and the issues in empowering differently abled.

Opportunities to empower differently abled people in Ampara District.

Sri Lankan government, Local government authorities and Non-government organizations together implement many programs in order to empower the differently abled people in Ampara district through national policy frameworks and community development programs. Such services and empowerment programs includes. The statement of national policy on disability promotes and protects the Rights of People who have Disability in the spirit of social justice. They will have opportunities for enjoying a full and satisfying life and for contributing to national development their knowledge, experience and particular skills and capabilities as equal citizens of Sri Lanka.

Differently abled have the educational opportunities in the main stream education system in the country, disability related teacher training for teachers involved in the special education system, vocational training opportunities, segregated vocational training opportunities, special schools such as school for the visually handicapped, school for the hearing disability, Islamic center for the physically handicapped, self – help and peer vocational training opportunities, community based rehabilitation programs, special employment and self employment services and support for self-employment and income generation. There are people who have disability in walking, and speaking are interested in involving small scale business activities if the sufficient fund and facilities are provided by the government in order to improve their quality of life.

Challenges in empowering differently abled in Ampara District.

Major issues identified in empowering differently abled people in Ampara District mainly includes, Many of the disadvantaged are hidden from society - they shy away. Social exclusion of persons with disabilities is the major issue in empowering Differently abled people in the area, Attitude of disables towards the special grants and fear of losing special grants and allowances when they become employed, lack of knowledge or awareness about the available opportunities for them to get training according to their abilities and employment potentials, lack of accessibility to educational opportunities lead to higher absenteeism and turnover of disabled children from attending school, negative attitude of teachers towards the special education for disabled people, vocational training opportunities are not utilized by differently abled people due the lack of employment opportunities for them in the private as well as government sector, coverage of vocational training and employment services in Ampara district by the government and non-government organizations are few, and inadequate financial assistance for self-employment are the major issues identified in empowering differently abled people in the Ampara district.

Conclusion

In daily life, differently abled people and their families face number of problems. To improve the quality of life of the differently abled people and their families, there should be empowerment projects focusing on their physical and mental rehabilitation by overcoming the challenges of issues related to empowering disables as well as for the efficient use of available opportunities.

Special programs need to be implemented targeting the general public in the area in order to educate them about the importance of these disabilities in the economic activities because, social acceptance of these people will do much to pave the way for such persons to interact in society with great confidence to face their problems.

Limitations of the study and Recommendation for future research

Although this study makes a valuable contribution to the opportunities and issues in empowering differently abled literature, it has limitations. First of all, limitation resulted in the survey sample, the sample size is relatively small and did not include all forms of disabilities and this might have negative impact on the generalizability of the results. This research succeeded in developing new knowledge about the opportunities and issues in empowering differently abled people in Ampara district but it did not give significant results about which opportunities and challenges are most relevant to the empowerment of differently abled people. Another limitation of this research was collecting information from female differently abled people, differently abled women and their families were very reluctant to give any information.

The above mentioned limitations offer an opportunity for future research as it is a qualitative research, the follow up surveys could be the next step to gain more knowledge about the specific opportunities and issues related to empowering differently abled people in Ampara district.

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