

Dignity and economic independence for youth with disabilities: Role of the state and citizens

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The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development clearly states that disability cannot be a reason or criteria for lack of access to development programming and the realisation of human rights.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which entered into force in 2008, is a key international instrument on disability. The CRPD marked a paradigm shift in attitudes and approaches to people with disability, shifting perspective towards viewing people with disability as rights-holders who are active members of society, rather than objects of charity or protection.

The Sri Lankan Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act No. 28 of 1996 defines a person with a disability as “any person who, because of any deficiency in his physical or mental capabilities, whether congenital or not, is unable by himself to ensure for himself, wholly or partly, the necessities of life. According to available census data in Sri Lanka about 8.7% of the total population above the age of 5 live with some form of disability, and it is estimated that about 300,000 people in the 18-60 age group have some form of disability. About 57% of disabled people are male, and 43% are female. How does this impact their families, social security and standing in the society? People with disability in Sri Lanka, and other South Asian countries, typically face significant stigma and discrimination that can lead to social emotional issues for the individual and the immediate family. The Sri Lankan culture, as we all know, epitomizes belongingness to family, community, and the societies we live in. How do we integrate the PWDs in our system, ensure that they have access to all benefits and opportunities and empower them to lead a life with dignity and pride?



As responsible empathetic citizens we must hold accountable the State, companies and other stakeholders, including ourselves on how we can appropriately invest in an improved future for the children and young people with disabilities!

Recognising the current environment

Disability and poverty are interlinked. Most often, people with disability are amongst the poorest and highly vulnerable. They are less likely to have access to health care, education, livelihoods, and social opportunities than people without disability, and often face discrimination. This can result in challenges such as reduced income, complex health issues, and social exclusion. There is substantial evidence that poverty can be cause for disability, triggers could be malnutrition and poor hygiene/sanitation, comorbidities, perilous working conditions. Disability prevalence

is highest amongst the poorest people.

Lack of early detection and timely intervention, weak systems that encourage inclusiveness in all walks of life are key reasons that many young people are left with few options. Rehabilitation services, which are limited to certain hospitals, are hardly accessible and/or affordable for persons with disabilities especially when their families belong to the low-income strata. More allocation of resources from the government and increasing its accessibility could bring in changes to the current scenario.

The national education system has also been inadequate in responding to specific needs of children and youth with disabilities. To name a few gaps include lack of suitable infrastructure, teachers who are specially trained to deal with children and young people with special needs, and appropriate reading materials.

Small steps with a resolve

ChildFund Sri Lanka, a leading child development organisation committed to

uplifting the lives of vulnerable children and their families, implementing integrated programmes in areas of health, sanitation and hygiene, nutrition, education, youth employment and entrepreneurship. Programmes are designed with child protection as the foundation including supporting and empowering children and young people with disabilities.

To promote and encourage dignity and self-reliance of the PWDs, ChildFund Sri Lanka in November 2018 launched Phase 1 of an innovative programme ‘Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Sri Lanka through Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR)’ to respond to some of the gaps highlighted above. Phase 1 was completed in June 2020.

The three-year project, funded by the Lipoid Foundation, and Alliance member ChildFund Germany, worked with over 1000 children and youth with a disability, their parents/caregivers in three Divisional Secretariat divisions - Manthai West (Mannar district), Manthai East (Mullaitivu district), and Wanathavilluwa (Puttalam district).

Key interventions included establishing a platform for disabled persons to voice their needs and concerns, strengthening divisional Disabled People’s Organisations (DPOs), building capacity for economic opportunities and connecting them with opportunities for employment, supporting for self-employment, equip existing vocational training centres to include PWDs. ChildFund Sri Lanka partnered with and provided capacity building opportunities for government stakeholders such as representatives from the Department of Social Services, Special Education personnel at the Zonal level, teachers and principals, health care workers.

Measuring impact

ChildFund Sri Lanka takes great pride in positively impacting 852 PWDs, 176 youth with disabilities and 216 children with disabilities, totaling 1,244 lives.

In addition, much needed awareness of issues impacting PWDs was created amongst volunteers, and government officers. Some of the affirmative changes that can be observed in the society are 26 self help groups consisting of 852 members, three DPOs inclusive of 15 officials, five steering committees each comprising 24 members and 156 Government officials who are actively functioning ensuring sustainability and continuity of the interventions that were initiated.

But we cannot stop here, as there is much more to be done.

In Phase II we will continue to go deeper in the same geographies and enhance the capacity of service providers, improve health and rehabilitation facilities (physiotherapy services, medical screening, rehabilitation plans, preventive health services and assistive devices), educational resources (general education, special education, teaching and learning materials) and vocational training and business development guidance (vocational skill development, provision of livelihood assets, access to credit, business development training, entrepreneurship training, employment linkages and career guidance).

The sky is the limit for our children and young people, and they can dream, and dream big irrespective of their background and/or disability. ChildFund Sri Lanka, along with its partners, is committed to bring real change in the lives of those who need support and look forward to new innovative partnerships and generating more resources from within the country.

(The writer is the Country Director of ChildFund India and Sri Lanka. She has over 25 years of rich experience in journalism, communication, fundraising and social development, across the US, UK and India. Over the years, she has built her reputation as a thought leader and expert communicator, by speaking and training at various forums and conferences, in over 30 countries)