



LIBERATING PERSONS WITH DISABILITY: THE ROLES OF ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The paper looked at who persons living with disabilities are and gives justification as to why persons living with disabilities need to be economically empowered. It outlines several ways in which persons living with disabilities can be economically empowered through Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR), referring to examples used by many CBR programmes and other related programmes. It emphasizes on the importance of sensitizing the community including the labour market, to increase recognition of the capabilities of Persons Living with Disabilities (PWDS) and enhance their participation in the general economic life of the society. The paper also outlines some strategies and way forward on how to ensure sustainability of economic empowerment of PWDS which cannot be achieved without their active participation in the whole process.

Key Words: Liberation, Disabilities, Roles, Empowerment and Opportunity.

Introduction

Education is an instrument for empowering every citizen and is imperative for reducing poverty and enhancing livelihoods. Empowerment in this context has been viewed as a strategy for addressing the needs and demands of people living with disabilities in less-developed countries, it seems to be the most accepted approach. For a long time, it has been apparent that persons living with disabilities should have equal rights, which they should be allowed to enjoy in the same way as the rest of the population. The notion of human rights is clearly demonstrated in the joint position statement of 1994 from the various United Nations Organizations. World Health Organization, United Nation Education System Cooperation Organization and International Law Organization. (2014), disclosed empowerment as a strategy within community development for rehabilitation, equalization and social inclusion of all persons and adults living with disabilities. Empowerment opportunities can be implemented through the combined efforts of persons living with disabilities, and the appropriate health, education, vocational and social services. In fact, empowerment promotes not

only the rights of persons living with disabilities, but also seeks to create an environment where they can have equal opportunities with their "able-bodied" counterparts.

Disability is seen as a damage done to some organ(s) of the body such that the affected person has functional limitation, especially in carrying out some important routine activities of daily life. According to Huib, John & Victor (2013), disability indicates the lack of power or ability to do something. It is usually regarded as a negative attribute. Disability in the World Health Organization classification system denotes consequences of impairments in terms of functional, performance and activities by the individual. Thus, an impairment is any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure or function. Disability refers to excesses or deficiencies of customarily expected activities, performance, and behaviour (Edu, 2016). In fact, persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others'. This explanation of PWDs reflects the social model of disability in which disability is perceived as a complex collection of conditions, many of which are created by the social environment rather than an attribute of the individual.

Disability affects hundreds of millions of families in developing countries. Currently, about 10% of the world's total population or roughly 650 million people live with a disability. For every child killed in warfare, three are injured and acquire a permanent form of disability; in some countries, up to a quarter of disabilities result from injury and violence. 80% of the persons living with disabilities live in developing countries (WHO, 2016). Persons living with disabilities include the hearing impaired, the physically impaired, the visually impaired, those with learning disabilities or intellectual disabilities, people with multiple disabilities, etc and they are the very persons that need economic empowerment opportunity.

Concept of Economic Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities

Economic empowerment is 'an ongoing process' which enables an individual to fulfil and be accountable for his or her duties and responsibilities and protect his or her rights in society. It is the process through which PWDs can develop the skills to take control of all aspects of their lives and their environment and includes confidence building, insight and the development of personal skills. Economic empowerment is a concept within general community development for the rehabilitation, equalization of opportunities and social inclusion of persons with disabilities themselves, their families, organizations, communities and the relevant governmental and non-governmental health, education, vocational,

social and other services (WHO, 2014). It therefore involves providing PWDs the resources, opportunities, knowledge and skills needed to increase their capacity to determine their own future and fully participate in community life. The empowerment of PWDs is vital to enable them to take their place in the wider society.

It therefore involves affording PWDs a variety of opportunities to discover themselves, understand their environment, be aware of their rights, take control of their lives and partake in important decisions that lead to their destiny. It also involves providing them with the resources, prospects, knowledge and skills to fend for themselves and to be an integral part of their society. Thus, the economic empowerment of PWDs involves ensuring that they are given the opportunity to earn a living to sustain themselves. It involves addressing employment issues as well as other issues that amplify the cycle of disability, poverty and the exclusion of PWDs. In other words, like every other person, PWDs must be regarded as equal before the law and must be given equal chances and opportunities to better themselves through employment, education, and such without discrimination.

Thus, economic empowerment of PWDs is clearly an approach towards developing a more inclusive society. As such it requires efforts from all spheres of life and sectors to become inclusive and ensure the full participation of persons living with disabilities. Thus empowerment needs a strong multi-sectorial focus, as disability is a cross-cutting development issue. Furthermore, it means that in order to make economic empowerment a success, all professional training should have a disability success, all professional training should have a disability awareness components in it. Huib, John & Victor (2013) stress that in practice, it would mean that the health sector should be made aware of the needs and demands of PWDs; the educational sector should become inclusive to PWDs; the social sector should focus their work on the acceptance and participation of PWDs; the social sector should focus their work on the acceptance and participation of PWDs; the livelihood sector should ensure that PWDs enjoy the same entitlement and access to work and employment as every other citizen and economic empowerment of PWDs should become a deliberate strategy to enable PWDs to live a life equally as their non-disabled peers.

Economic empowerment on the other hand as, Helander (2013) opined as “an on-going process, which enables an individual to fulfil and be accountable for his/her duties, responsibilities and protect his/her rights in the society. Part of the process is to provide PWDs the resources, opportunities, knowledge and skills needed to increase their capacity to determine their own future and fully participate in community life. In fact, economic empowerment of PWDs therefore, refers to giving them a variety of opportunities to discover themselves, understand their environment, be aware of their rights, take control of their lives

and partake in important decisions that leads to their destiny.

Economic empowerment is associated with several activities concerned with the establishment and operation of a business enterprise. Allawad (2017) opined that entrepreneurship is the activity which involves evaluating business opportunities, development of a business plan and determination of the required resources as well as management of resulting enterprise. It can also be seen as a new way of developing a business plan for PWDs better than its usual way. Edu (2016) view economic empowerment education for PWDs as a programme that is tailored to job seekers, unemployed people and a scientist, engineers and researchers to encourage them to commercialize the intellectual property. In fact all the above mentioned can enhance and liberate the life of persons with disabilities. Furthermore, empowerment through education is often linked in a chain of support offered to those who decide to explore self-employment and establish a small or large enterprise. This type of education is for both individual living with disabilities or able body. Akponmi (2018) avowed that it is pertinent to expose all learners to empowerment education since this form of education of PWDs can be learned, practiced and developed. However, empowerment skills and attitudes provide benefits to society even beyond their application to business activities can be useful to persons living with disabilities in their daily responsibilities and business skills need to be provided to those special needs persons who choose to be self-employed or start their own ventures (Edu, 2016).

Importance of Economic Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities

Findings from a recent study on the "impact of services for PWDs on Economic empowerment reveals that PWDs suffer various forms of barriers including' access to empowerment, obtaining appropriate work, retaining work, receiving appropriate wages, discriminating attitude, appropriate skills, lack of educational qualification, inaccessible environment and transport system (Momin, 2014).

WHO, UNESCO & LIO (2014) observe that, "there is a strong correlation between disability and poverty. Poverty leads to increased disability and disability, in turn leads to increased poverty". When economic empowerment comes to stay in life of persons living with disabilities poverty and increase of people with disabilities will drastically reduce. In fact the effect of poverty on people living with disabilities is unbelievably huge and devastating. The Department for International Development (DFID) (2020) states that 50% disabilities cases are preventable and directly linked to poverty. Narayan and Petesch (2012) observed that, "poverty violates the fundamental human rights of PWDs depriving them of the basic necessities of life including, health, education, safe drinking water, food, shelter and clothing including means of livelihood.

“When they are economically empowered they will meet the needs of the above mentioned. PWDs need economic empowerment in areas of Agricultural science, vocational training and the like in order to live a better and fruitful life in the society.

Empowering PWDs economically is very vital because it will enable them to live a normal life and they can also contribute significantly to the development of the nation. Research shows that majority of persons living with disabilities are unemployed, and often denied employment opportunities even when they have met the necessary requirements. Consequently they have no stable income and have to depend on the mercy of family members, well-wishers and charity groups for handouts to sustain their livelihood. International instruments, like the convention on Human Rights and Rights of the Child; ILO convention No. 159 on national policy for employment of PWDs, and the UN Standard rules on Equalization of Opportunities for PWDs, are practically ignored by most governments in Africa. As such, PWDs continue to suffer increased “discrimination”, marginalization and oppression” (Onota, 2013; Akintaro, 2014) from the so-called able-bodied opportunists. Omubene, (2012) argues that such manifestations of negative societal attitudes suffered by PWDs creates animosity, engenders resentment and stifles initiatives and creativity”. These attitudinal and environmental barriers tend to limit their abilities to participate effectively in economic activities. PWDs have great potentials that could be tapped and harnessed for community development, given appropriate opportunities, attitude, and approach.

The challenges lies with Community Base Rehabilitation (CBR) programmes as grassroots services providers and change agents. Coleridge (2013), Rifkin & Pridmore (2015) suggested that is high time that the “powerless” be liberated and given the opportunities to gain experience and confidence needed to influence the decisions that affect their own daily lives; to discover and choose the path leading to their destinies, take control of their lives and make their contributions towards the development of their communities.

Strategies for Ensuring Economic Empowerment Opportunities of PWDs in Nigeria

The main ways to achieve successful economic empowerment **opportunities** of PWDs are discussed below:

Providing Educational Opportunities: Education is a powerful tool for economic empowerment of PWDs. Rifkin & Pridmore (2015), support this fact when they stated that “Information is power”. PWDs can gain knowledge and skills needed to perform functions, tasks or carry out some socio-economic activities for

personal and community development. Education for empowerment should start from pre-school to adulthood. Economic empowerment programme should not underestimate the importance of pre-school skills like; speech, sign language, sorting/measuring, orientation and mobility, use of tools, daily living skills etc taught to children at pre-school stage. By teaching such skills, we are already preparing them for the future. Early pre-vocational skills training like farming, welding, shoe making, computer training, sewing, knitting and the likes will increase self-confidence, raise self-esteem and perfection which enhance effective task performance during future working life. Nigeria, like many African countries has limited number of inclusive schools offering special needs education and training in vocational skills. The very few existing ones do not have appropriate curricula that provide for the special needs of PWDs. Empowerment programmes and relevant government services need to support PWD's in schools with necessary assistive devices like hearing aids, talking calculators, mobility aids, provide learning materials/equipment, as well as encourage disability friendly school environment.

In fact, empowerment through education cannot be achieved only by training PWDs alone: it is also important to build capacity of the rehabilitation professionals working with them. However, to determine the effectiveness of these training or determine the needs to increase evaluation of impact of services provided by staff who benefit from trainings, especially how the negative attitudes are changed and the economic status of PWD's are improved Breisacher (2012) maintained that in-service training for PWD's under open employment gives them full qualification for favourable competition with able-bodied persons, and can also help them in retaining their jobs, thereby stabilizing their income.

Providing Employment Opportunities: Article 23(1) of universal Declaration of human rights by UN states that; everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment rate. In fact, unemployment rate among PWD's, in the developing world is an overwhelming problem up to 80% in some countries (LLO, 2013). Caswell (2013), observes that even though there exists legislation for quota system favouring employment of PWD's, unfortunately, this legislation is either underutilized or not enforced. In fact, many PWD's are well educated and have brilliant ideas to contribute towards development of their communities and indeed their nation, through public services; but generally they are not allowed the opportunity to do so due to their disabilities in the planning and implementation process. If PWD's have to be involved, then they must be fully represented by way of employment in all government ministries and offices. However, most

government and some NGO's in Africa do to some extent provide sheltered employment for PWD's although social exclusion, increase stigma and denies them their rights to equal employment opportunities as enjoyed by able-bodied persons.

Daniel & Sevin (2016) advocated that empowerment should facilitate employment of persons living with disabilities in leadership positions to enable them take advantage of such opportunities to develop themselves and use their initiatives in handling their responsibilities. Employers should also allow PWD's to join labour unions to enable them express their views and feelings concerning general problems and issues affecting their lives. Empowerment programmes can encourage open employment of PWD's through creating awareness on the need for equal opportunities for PWD's, educating the public on their political process by forming pressure groups capable of influencing government policies.

Self-Directed Employment: Self-directed employment is an option that is increasing interest of people living with disabilities both in economically developed and developing countries. This could be a strong tool for economic empowerment of people living with disabilities; not only because they take the initiative, but also because they play a leading role in their structural set up and day to day decision making and management process, and working in cooperative controlled by special needs persons. Albright (2013) supports self-directed efforts as an effective tool for empowerment and development. He further stated that: "Man can only liberate himself or develop himself. He cannot be liberated or developed by another. For man makes himself. It is his ability to act deliberately for self-determined purposes which distinguishes him from animals." The expansion of his consciousness and his society must therefore ultimately be what we mean by development. Empowerment programmes should encourage similar initiatives in other developing countries to enhance PWD's.

Providing Opportunities for Financial Resources: In an attempt to empower persons living with disabilities economically, it is not adequate for empowerment programmes to stop at "teaching them how to fish" without arming them with the necessary equipment that they need to use in "catching fish". PWD's who have successfully graduated from vocational training and have not been able to secure wage-earning generation activities in order to earn a living. Daniel & Sevin (2016) reported that in Nigeria, services for persons living with disabilities gave soft loans to 40 persons in 2003 under its Revolving loan funds. Loans ranged from ₦1,000 to ₦50,000. Loans are determined by the client's disability condition, nature of the business and economic situation of the PWD's/family among other requirements. Fact finding from world survey conducted by CBMI to determine

the success and failure of vocational training and livelihood programmes confirm that PWD's supported with both grant and loans are likely to succeed better than those who only have access to loans (Caswell, 2013). PWD's also need technical support for empowerment programmes in order to succeed.

Areas of support include: Elaborate business plan, teach basic book keeping, monitor progress, evaluate execution and advise in areas that need to be improved upon. PWD's should be encouraged to cultivate the habit of saving, either with the programmes or with local community banks; this provides relief in times of any hiccups, helps in case of expansion and raising the status of PWD's (Malcolm, 2016). In realization of the importance of economic integration programmes for the empowerment of PWD's and the challenges that exist in running them, CBMI recommends the training of specialist supervisors for all CBMI-supported empowerment programmes. The invaluable support of such supervisors can enhance the management of the programmes.

Recommendations

Based on the above discussed in the process of liberating persons with disabilities, the following recommendations were made:

1. Governments should develop policies and structure that support and complement empowerment programmes. Provision of an environment that enables partnerships between different levels in the same area of services as well as linkages between different services is essential in empowering persons living with disabilities.
2. Government should involve more persons with disabilities into its Npower programmes, small and medium empowerment scale, FADAMA programmes, N-Agro programmes, soft loan programmes and many other programmes that will empower the general public.
3. The number of service providers complementary to empowerment need to be increased. To achieve this, training of mid-level cadres has to be intensified, and training be provided with an appropriate mind set, emphasizing collaboration and adaptation to community set-up rather than a sterile opposition between specialist and grassroots approaches. Innovative ways of training therefore need to be introduced, enabling flexibility: for example, consideration has to be given to more modular courses. This allows continuous professional growth over a period of time while working.
4. Emphasis has to be placed on the persons living with disability in a way that empowers him/her to make decisions and gain autonomy. If programmes are person centered and the aim is to offer services tailored to each person, partnership building will become necessary. Thus, Specialists whether

providing health- related support, counselling or educational services, need to recognize that there is a continuum of services that do not end at a clinic, a school or an office, DPOs and family members.

5. Increase financial support for economic integration activities, increase public awareness on capabilities and possibilities of PWD's encourage capacity building of PWDs.
6. Encourage utilization of locally existing related services e.g.; community banks, vocational training centers etc encourage innovations.
7. Encourage monitoring, evaluation and research, encourage participation of the civil society organization (CSO) in planning and implementation of government economic policies. This can be achieved through holding consultative forums.

Conclusion

Economic empowerment of PWD's is very crucial in raising their status. However, this cannot be achieved without the involvement and participation of all stakeholders; the government, members of the community, the labour market and PWD's themselves. Empowerment programmes need to increase sensitization of the public on disability issues and rights of PWD's. Also innovation and increased support for economic integration activities is necessary; as well as implementation of realistic and results oriented plans in order to achieve successful empowerment of PWD's. In conclusion, the ability of PWD's to earn a living for themselves, rather than depending on others for a living is a cornerstone for their economic empowerment. It is important for PWD's to have a sustained economic power in order to meet their essential needs and contribute towards community development.

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