

THE LINK BETWEEN DISABILITY, POVERTY AND THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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Abstract

Although there is a world-wide trend towards the inclusion of individuals with disabilities into the society, the unpleasant attitudes of society as well as the unfavourable government policies have systematically precluded the disabled from having equal access to education, employment opportunities, health facilities and recreational activities. However, this negative trend is observed in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which did not specifically treat the issues of persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities are therefore predisposed and subjected to abject poverty while they become a burden to immediate family members and look forward to aids from charity. In order to achieve the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals, persons with disabilities need to be considered for empowerment so as to reduce their total dependency on the non-disabled members of the community. Therefore, this paper discusses the relationship between disability, poverty and the Millennium Development Goals and strategies to help meet the economic needs of persons with disabilities before 2015.

Keywords: disability, poverty, Millennium Development Goals, education

Introduction

The 21st century has brought to the limelight, the commitment of international organizations, agencies and governments to making the world a better place to live in through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs summarize the development goals agreed on at international conferences and the world summits during the 1990s. In September 2000, world leaders distilled the key goals and targets in the millennium declaration. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have set eight (8) targets to achieve by the year 2015.

The eight goals target to increase incomes; reduce hunger; achieve universal primary education; eliminate gender inequality; reduce maternal and child mortality; reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria; reverse the loss of natural resources and biodiversity; improve access to water, sanitation, and good housing; and establish effective global partnerships. However, global targets fail to specifically target persons with disability (World Bank, 2013). As a result, individuals with disability, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, are among the poorest of the poor with little or no means of survival, low income and unemployment. As we approach the 2015 target date, there is the need to consider persons with disabilities in assessment of the present goals and to provide a sustainable future for them before and after 2015.

Disability Issues

Disability is a normal phenomenon in the sense that it exists in all societies, affecting predictable and identifiable proportions of each population. An estimated 10 percent of the world's population – 650 million people – live with a disability (WHO, 2009). Data from developing countries is highly variable, but generally the proportion of the disabled population is much lower than in developed countries. Ademokoya and Oyewumi (2004) stated that persons with hearing impairment, visual disability, mental retardation, speech and language disorders and learning disability hardly benefit from the general education programmes which are designed for the non-disabled counterparts. Persons with disabilities have the same needs as other people. Yet, they often face barriers to information and social services (Adigun, 2012), stigma and prejudice (Shakespeare, 1994). The ignorance and attitude of society and individuals, including health-care providers as well as ill-government policies raise most of these barriers and not the disability itself.

In the developing countries, segregated institutional systems have evolved over time, initially to care for people with disabilities, to rehabilitate and educate them. These systems have raised the functional capabilities of persons with disabilities to levels where significant numbers have become capable of mainstream social and economic participation. However, the compartmentalization of disabled people in segregated institutional systems, together with the limited expectations on which these systems are based, have worked against the social and economic inclusion of people with disabilities by perpetuating their isolation and reinforcing longstanding negative stereotypes that to this day significantly impair their ability to make social and

Due to social exclusion and discrimination in the labour market, World Bank (2013) noted that persons with disabilities may be disproportionately affected by unemployment, leading to an increased incidence of poverty. In addition, family members acting as caretakers may be unemployed, healthcare costs related to having a disability may be high, and families whose head of household is disabled are more likely to be poor. Inadequate infrastructure is a major cause for ill-health and disabling conditions. Inaccessible environments, technology, transport, products and services restrict the equal participation to economic, social activities and functional capacity of many groups of people with temporary or permanent limitations. The physical, institutional and attitudinal obstacles that restrict the exercising of basic rights and fundamental freedoms by disabled people also affect their families. Due to direct discrimination and obstacles to full social and economic participation of persons with disabilities and their families they are particularly vulnerable to poverty. Their score by all MDG indicators are at the lowest end. This is corroborated by the assertion of the Handicap International (2006) who noted that people with disabilities are not specifically protected by international legally binding rules. In contrast to other vulnerable populations, they do not benefit from the existence of a specific international body in charge of monitoring the respect of their rights.

The Twin: Disability and Poverty

Paul Wolfowitz, a former World Bank President once stated that:

"People with disabilities are also people with extraordinary talent. Yet they are too often forgotten. When people with disabilities are denied opportunities, they are more likely to fall into poverty -- and people living in conditions of poverty are more likely to develop disabilities. As long as societies exclude those with disabilities, they will not reach their full potential and the poor in particular will be denied opportunities that they deserve."

In the past, all too often, persons with disabilities have been either incorrectly seen as people whose lives are defined by medical and rehabilitative needs (the medical model) or as individuals who are recipients of social and economic support (the charity model). In fact, while some persons with disabilities – like all other sections of society – do have medical concerns and need social support, the most pressing concern is poverty. Poverty is the state in which an individual lacks a certain amount of material possession or economic power to cater for his or her immediate need. Poverty

is associated with the undermining of a range of key human attributes, including health and quality of life.

Nigeria has one of the greatest development potentials in Africa given the vastness of her resources and above all her rich human resource endowment. But regardless of these potentials, Aniekan (2011) regretted that Nigeria is still among the poorest countries of the world with her economy marred by multiple difficulties. Thus poverty, in both absolute and relative terms, constitutes one of the most serious problems confronting both the disabled and nondisabled in Nigeria. Statistically, between 1960 and 1980, the poverty level covered about 28.0 percent of the population; by 1996 it rose alarmingly to about 66 percent of the population. According to the United Nation Development Program Human Development Report (2008-2009) which combined such components as level of inequality, life expectancy at birth, standard of living and access to knowledge, and education, between 2004 and 2009, poverty in Nigeria has worsened from 0.43 to 0.49. This shows that despite its vast resources, Nigeria ranks among the 25 poorest countries of the world.

UNICEF (1981) uses a prevalence figure of disability and impairments of one in ten while UNESCO (1979) estimates the prevalence of learning problems severe enough to need special education to be 10-15 percent, WHO (1981) gave a more conservative estimate of 7-10 percent for all age groups but points out that at any given time, about 1.5 percent of the total population consist of persons with disabilities. Corroborating the above figures, Mba (1995) observe that one in every one thousand Nigerian has a serious hearing problem. Considering the Nigerian population which is estimated at 150 million, it can be said that nothing less than 10 percent of her population suffers one form of disability or the other. In other words, they represent a larger percentage of the poor in Nigeria. A growing body of research shows the interrelation between persons with disabilities and poverty (Hoogeveen, 2005; Mitra & Sambamoorthi, 2008). This poverty is due to a lack of education, social marginalization, and barriers to employment. It is also due to a lack of knowledge about disability issues among decision makers, who simply do not understand that persons with disabilities need the same opportunities for poverty-reduction available to all other members of society (Filmer, 2008). According to Thomas (2005), poverty and disability are linked in a vicious downward spiral. Poverty causes disabling conditions and disability makes families vulnerable to economic, social and environmental shocks.

Lack of income and productive resources sufficient to ensure sustainable livelihoods, hunger and malnutrition, ill-health, limited or lack of access to education and other basic services as claimed by the Millennium Development Goals has reduced individuals living with disabilities to “second class citizens”. Homelessness, inadequate housing, unsafe and degraded environment, social discrimination are synonymous to persons living with disabilities. According to the World Bank (2007), the proportion of disabled people is 20% among the poor. The rapid pace of urbanization has also led to the concentration of a large number of disabled people into cities where the only means for living often is to engage in begging. Disabled people are seriously under-served by all basic services. Only a small percentage of disabled children have access to schooling. While disabled people belong to the poorest of the poor neither the MDGs nor the majority of poverty reduction strategies (PRS) consider disability as an issue to be mentioned.

Poverty is both a cause and consequence of disability (Thomas, 2005). The World Bank estimates that 20% of the world’s poorest people are disabled and the disability itself affects not only the individual, but their families and carers too (Elwan, 1999). Disability typically has severe, negative financial consequences for the individual and the household. One disabled focus group participant in India summed this up that if people become disabled, they have to pay a lot for health care and rehabilitation (Thomas, 2005). The economic costs of disability have three elements: direct costs of treatment; foregone income from disability and indirect costs to others who provide care. Persons with disabilities typically lack access to health and education, clean water and sanitation, have poor housing and may live in over-crowded, unsanitary and unsafe areas. However, for disabled people, their lives are typically so much harder because of their impairments. Unfortunately, persons with disabilities are typically actively and unwittingly excluded from development activities.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Persons with Disabilities (PWDs)

The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) emerged from the United Nations (UN) Millennium Declaration in 2000, and are arguably the most politically important pact ever made for international development (UNDP, 2003). They identify specific development priorities across a very broad range, including poverty, education, gender, health, environment, and international partnerships. These goals have substantially shaped development dialogue and investment; some development agencies judge all their activities on the contribution to achievement of the MDGs (Sumner & Tiwari, 2009).

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) represent an unprecedented global consensus about measures to reduce poverty. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are the world's time-bound and quantified targets for addressing extreme poverty in its many dimensions – income, poverty, hunger, diseases, inadequate housing while promoting gender equality, education and environmental sustainability (MDG Nigeria, 2010).

Clearly, the MDGs have had notable success in encouraging global political consensus, providing a focus for advocacy, improving the targeting and flow of aid, and improving the monitoring of development projects. However, Jeff, Rukmini, Oona, Ephraim, Guy, and Veerle, et al. (2010) stated that MDGs have also encountered a range of common challenges. Challenges with the conceptualization and execution of the MDGs arise at the three discrete levels on which they are constructed: goals, targets, and indicators. The very specific nature of many goals, reflecting their diverse, independent origins, leaves considerable gaps in coverage and fails to realize synergies that could arise across their implementation. Apart from women of reproductive age and children, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) framework does not make any reference to marginalized groups such as persons living with disabilities. With the focus only on aggregate results, national progress can be made without any change in the situation of the poorest.

According to Thomas (2005), disability is not specifically mentioned in the MDGs, but disabled people are implicitly included. Most development agencies acknowledge that the goals cannot be achieved without addressing the needs and rights of disabled people. However, the relationship and relevance of disability to the MDGs is not so well articulated and acknowledged. Attention only to averages and 'easier' groups would jeopardize the ultimate goal of poverty eradication, and may result in even more intractable poverty in 2015. These partial targets mean the MDGs framework is inherently flawed because it does not meet the needs of the world's poorest and most marginalized populations who are living with disabilities. The lack of specific attention to marginalized groups in the targets and indicators creates a real danger that efforts to achieve the MDGs will push some of the world's poorest people to the periphery. In particular, the exclusion of people with disabilities who cannot access mainstream social, economic and political life, and have limited access to almost all areas of development is extremely problematic.

MDGs and Poverty Reduction among Persons with Disability: Way out

The key to ensuring that persons with disability benefit from the MDGs is to systematically identify the factors that currently block their inclusion in programmes and policies based on the MDGs. This lack of inclusion by general development actors often is because it is incorrectly believed that special skills are needed to deal with disabilities issues and it therefore should be left to “experts”. While technical assistance might be needed in some specific cases to ensure inclusion of persons with disability, most often development programmes providing things like vocational training, water and sanitation, economic support and microcredit should work in collaboration with special education professionals and other allied professional in order to make such programmes more relevant and realistic. There should be a reallocation and broader mobilization of domestic resources towards poverty reduction even among persons with disabilities as claimed by the Millennium Development Goals so as to strengthen governance and institutions, and adopt sound social and economic policies.

A greater commitment to increase funding towards delivering quality pro-poor service to persons with disability at the local level is needed. The civil society groups should increase their community watchdog role and provide critical feedback to inform policy development and planning towards poverty reduction among persons with disabilities. Equally, it is important to review the progress towards meeting the targets of poverty reduction that involve both governments and civil society groups. This mechanism could entail: independent national bodies established and tasked with monitoring progress with wide participation of a range of groups; national collection and review of data regarding persons with disability; external comparative analysis in partnership with multilateral bodies or international organizations empowering persons with disability; national analysis and decision on action in the form of public, parliamentary, press, or other forms of debate and discussion.

Another effective way of eradicating poverty among persons with disability is to empower them with education. Down through the ages, it is known that education is the antidote to poverty and ignorance and the key for unlocking natural resources. Okebukola (2013) stated that no nation striving for accelerated development does so without huge investment in education. Okebukola (2013) citing World Bank (2008) posited that there is a compelling body of research concluding that education is the main plank for economic development. Lau, et al (1991) stressed that education enables the individual to perform new tasks; to receive and process new information; to communicate

and therefore coordinate activities with one another; to evaluate and adjust to changed circumstances. Education also helps to reduce subjective uncertainty, and unnecessary anxiety, as fatalistic acceptance of the status quo, thereby enhancing the probability of adoption of new technologies or practices by the individual.

Investing in education would not only improve people's ability to acquire and use information, but it will also deepen their understanding of themselves and the world, enrich their minds by broadening their experience, and improve the choice they make as consumers, producers and citizens. Education will also strengthen their ability to meet their wants and those of their families by increasing their productivity, and their potential to achieve a higher standard of living. It will also improve their confidence and their ability to create and innovate, thus multiplying their opportunities for personal and social achievement. Therefore, organisations and governments should direct attention toward investing on educating the population of persons with disability. Investing in education could take different forms, such as massive expansion of education facilities and vocationalisation of education. Investing in vocational training would go a long way in reducing poverty, in that most children from poor homes prefer functional education which would provide them skills for earning their livelihood. Thus vocationalisation of education, diversification of courses at the secondary and higher secondary levels and setting up of technical education centres and rehabilitation centres most especially in rural areas would help in reducing poverty among people with disabilities.

Abubakar (2010) noted that the shift from general education to specifically entrepreneurship education becomes necessary in the present realities of the need to develop and empower particularly the youths in the society. There is seeming consensus on the importance of entrepreneurship in ameliorating some socio-economic problems especially poverty, unemployment, and all sort of social vices in the society. UNESCO (2008) in Enu (2012) stated that entrepreneurship education is made up of all kinds of experiences that give students the ability and vision of how to access and transform opportunities of different kinds. It goes beyond business creation but vital to fuelling a more robust global economy, brings new ideas to life through innovation, creativity and the desire to build something of lasting value. It is about increasing the ability of individuals with disabilities to anticipate and respond to societal changes. Entrepreneurship education is also seen by UNESCO as education and training which allows individuals with disabilities to develop and use their creativity and to take initiatives,

responsibility and risks, while Lee and Wong (2008) regard entrepreneurship education as a catalyst for economic development and job creation in any society. Therefore, government at all levels must continually foster educational cultures within communities to keep the entrepreneurship pipeline filled for generations to come.

Many of the current programmes that address poverty issues in the MDG can be extended to persons with disabilities with little or no modification needed. In other cases, small changes in planning at the outset of the programme or simple, low-cost adaptations can be incorporated into ongoing policies and programmes to ensure that outreach efforts to eradicate poverty reach many more persons with disabilities. Small subgroups of persons with specific types of disabilities may need disability-specific adaptations – the Deaf community for example, will often need sign language interpretation to take full advantage of services and programmes offered to the general population, people who are visually impaired will often benefit from materials made available in Braille, Mobility guide and adapted environment.

Conclusion

Individuals with disability suffer a great deal as a result of loss of function of either one or more body organs. They are susceptible to discrimination, prejudice and lack of economic prowess. Hence, they are left with little or nothing but to resort to begging for alms. Therefore, they are largely represented among Nigerians living below the poverty line or perhaps living below \$2 per day. They indeed need assistance to help them come out of the abject poverty so that they too can live a fulfilled life. In other words, the mission and vision of the MDGs in eradicating poverty and hunger will be very useful and can be achieved only when all stakeholders put all resources together to ensure reduction of poverty among persons with disability. Education of persons with disability must be taken with utmost seriousness, sincerity and commitment by governments at all levels. The curriculum of students with disability should encourage entrepreneurship; they should be exposed to vocational education through individualized educational programme. Persons with disability should be encouraged to start up a small scale business with interest-free loans so that they can be independent and by doing so there will be drastic reduction in street begging and poverty rate. Persons with disability should be encouraged to compete favourably with their nondisabled counterparts when seeking for job.

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