

**Working through Religious Bodies to promote Inclusion and Social Justice for
Persons with Disability in Kenya**

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the role of religious bodies in promoting disability mainstreaming in this country. Empowering persons with disability is one of the challenges that Kenya faces even as it seeks to fully implement its national and international development obligations such as Kenya Vision 2030 and the sustainable development goals. Yet, this is an area where religious organizations could be engaged in supplementing government efforts. The paper is guided by the social participation theory as derived from C Okollo's (1978) observation that religious entities have an obligation to engage in transforming the socio-economic and political environment within which they carry out their operations. The objectives of this paper are: to examine the challenges facing religious bodies in promoting a disability friendly environment and to determine the available opportunities that can be utilized by religious bodies to enhance their participation in the quest for a disability friendly social, economic and political environment. The information for this paper was gathered through reviewing of policy documents, library materials and online searches. Among the key arguments advanced by this paper include the fact that the Kenyan social, economic and political environment is still largely anti-navigation for persons with disability, that there is poor coordination between government and the religious bodies in the various efforts and initiatives to address the vulnerability of persons with disability, that religious bodies in Kenya consider it part of their duty to positively intervene in the lives of the vulnerable members of society, including persons with disability, and they have a better network to do so as compared to the government machinery yet they are poorly facilitated as compared to the government.. The paper therefore recommends, among other things, that there is need for religious bodies to work with the government in a cooperative manner in order to provide the necessary link that leads to effective delivery of disability rehabilitation services in Kenya and that disability rehabilitation services in this country need to be re-engineered so as to emphasize the transformation of the social environment to make it truly disability friendly for an inclusive and just implementation of Kenya Vision 2030 as well as Sustainable development goals.

Key Words

Disability rehabilitation services, enabling factors, disabling factors, disability mainstreaming, assistive technology

1. Introduction

Religious education is inherently liberating. Where religion has been used by some regimes as a basis for oppression, injustice and exclusion, such regimes have not been longlasting, simply because such application of religious knowledge is a departure rather than a norm. In Kenya,

persons with disability continue to suffer due to a largely unfriendly environment. The state has formulated numerous policies aimed at uplifting the welfare of persons with disability, but these policies are yet to result in the realization of a fully obstacle free environment for the targeted group of people. More needs to be done in order to enhance disability mainstreaming within the Kenyan society. To this end, the role of religious bodies becomes critical, given that Kenya has a large network of religious organizations, spread across the face of this country. This paper examines efforts by religious bodies to assist in creating a disability friendly environment that favours personal development and self actualization for persons with disability. The paper focuses on two aspects that lie at the centre of disabled persons' quest for personal development and self-determination; accessibility to education and availability of assistive technology. The paper examines ways in which religious education can be oriented in order to enhance accessibility and availability of these two important disability rehabilitation services.

The paper considers Religious bodies as key drivers in the socially just and inclusive transformation of society. It underscores the need for the transformation of society towards inclusion and social justice, if disabled people are to effectively benefit from the various development programmes initiated by the state as well as various non-governmental organisations. The quest for self-realization and self-reliance by persons with disability is pivoted by provisions in the national constitution and in the Kenya Vision 2030 and other development projections. This paper argues for the pedagogical reorientation of religious education so as to render it suitable in supplementing efforts to mainstream disability in this country. The paper attempts to show that for disabled persons to become actively involved in the implementation of the Kenya Vision 2030, society must undergo such transformation as is adequate to entirely remove all the barriers that exclude this category of people from mainstream economic, political and social activity.

The paper therefore argues that Religious bodies have a major role to play in ensuring the realization of the much-needed transformation within the Kenyan society; a transformation that will create an enabling environment for disabled persons, thereby establishing an inclusive society where social justice (for all people, including persons with disability) shall flow 'like a 'never-failing stream' (Amos 5:24 NIV).

This paper is divided into five sections. The first section contains a historical background on social transformation (as society's tactic for self-preservation and perpetuation). In the second section, the focus is on an understanding of disability and challenges disabled people encounter in their quest for self-realization and self-determination. The third part examines the role of Religious bodies as key drivers for social transformation. Part four examines the factors that hinder effective participation in disability rehabilitation service delivery among religious bodies. Part five examines the opportunities available for active participation in disability rehabilitation among religious bodies. The sixth and last section contains suggestions on how Religious bodies can re-orient their

organization to further strengthen their participation in social transformation towards the effective rehabilitation of persons living with disability.

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2. Historical Background for Social Transformation

It is useful to examine the place of transformation as a tool for humanity's self-adjustment, self-perpetuation and sustained existence.

Throughout the history of humankind, men and women have had, at certain times, to make crucial changes in their ways of doing things - which adjustment has significantly contributed to their continued existence either as individuals or communities.

The orientation of society particularly in modern sub-Saharan Africa is such that issues of disability and disabled people are virtually neglected. It is society's attitude towards disability that is largely to blame for the deplorable state that is the plight for many a disabled people in this region in general and Kenya in particular.

Thus to overcome this problem and create a disability-friendly environment, society needs to undergo a transformation, especially in the perception of and response to disability. Religious bodies ought to serve more or less as torchbearers in this quest for social transformation. In Christian cycles, the critical role that religious bodies can play in transforming society is evident particularly during the Church reformation in the 16th century that is said to have been driven largely by a generation that will not take 'business as usual' as their preferred option for doing things. In muslim cycles, this feat is best exemplified during the golden age of Caliph Umar (634-644 CE) and also during the reign of the Abbasid dynasty (750-1250 CE).

Religious bodies are also known to have served as important vehicles in bringing about changes in the political arena, particularly in the transition from feudalism to nationalism; from authoritarianism and dictatorship to open democracy and from colonialism or political oppression to independence or political freedom.

And in the field of economics, religious bodies have been pertinent in the emergency and development of a free-market economy –that is a market solely driven by the forces of demand and supply, as is now practiced in many countries world-over.

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that social transformation has a historical background and appears to be society's major tactic for self-adjustment, self-perpetuation and self-preservation.

It is also evident that, historically, religious bodies have served as key catalysts in the process of social transformation.

There is need for the government of Kenya to seek for ways of engaging religious bodies in order to ensure the effective attainment of the Kenya Vision 2030.

The Kenya Vision 2030 is rested on three main pillars: the Social, Economic and Political pillars. It is important to note the crucial role religious bodies could play as key partners in all the three pillars

Issues touching on disability are directly reflected in the Vision 2030 manifesto, particularly as regards the need for their integration into mainline economic, social, and political activities of society. In fact the word disability and its derivatives appears severally in the document. Besides this explicit coverage, however, most of the disability-related issues are also covered in the manifesto in an implicit manner. Since the ultimate aim of the Kenya Vision 2030 is to create an egalitarian society, it is only fair to believe that the interests of people living with disability are also included in that grand plan. However, unless deliberate efforts are put in place, the Kenya Vision 2030 may continue to remain a farfetched dream for members of the community of persons with disability. As is argued in this paper, what is needed is for the Kenyan society to undergo a transformation, particularly in its conception of disability and the kind of treatment it extends towards people with disability.

3. Disabled persons in Kenya and their specific concerns

Disability is widely understood to be a medical as well as a social condition (Malinda 2005: p. 22). In line with these two viewpoints, there are two models of disability - that is the Social and the Medical models. These models consider disability as an offshoot of the medical condition of an individual as well as the social construction of society.

The Social model is an approach to disability that attributes the problem of disability to societal barriers rather than the person's medical condition.

This model sees the removal from society of all such barriers as the only way of effectively addressing the challenges encountered by people with disability. Thus the social model describes disability in terms of restrictions imposed on disabled people by social organization (Hunt 1966; UPIAS: 1976). Some of these restrictions include inaccessible buildings, information and transport (Malinda 2005:21).

These three factors are particularly significant for successful participation and operation in the socio-economic activities within the community.

The Social model of disability explains disability as resulting from any behaviour or barriers that prevent people with impairments from choosing to take part in the life of the society. By being thus restricted, disabled people find themselves unable to engage in the socio-economic and political

activities in a sustainable manner, a situation that can only be reversed through removal of all such restricting factors through structural re-arrangement (transformation) of society.

The driving force behind the Social model is that it provides an inclusive view of the disability. Hence, as a constructionist view, the Social model defines disability quite simply as the social consequences of having impairment.(Malinda 2005:20)

In line with HarrahsNdinda Malinda (2005), this paper adopts the Social model of disability and uses it to explain disability in Kenya as an outcome of the negative traditional beliefs and attitudes towards the persons with disability by the society and the failure by the society and the government (as well as other public) agencies to provide support services and adapted environment for them to lead normal lives. (Kabue , 2003).

It is not possible to give an exhaustible list of all the types of disability within a given location. This is because some cultural and religious practices still prevent many disabled people, particularly children from public exposure. However, this is a worldwide challenge and occurs even in the developed countries where disability awareness levels are known to be high.

It is important to note that some forms of disability can be categorized as mild while others are acute (WHO& WB, 2011). According to the 2011 World Report on Disability jointly prepared by World Health Organisation (WHO) and World Bank (WB), in

mild disabilities (such as a deformity involving the pharynx section of one's fingers), the ability of the impaired person is not greatly affected as compared to a person who completely cannot use both his or her legs (WHO& WB, 2011).

Most common disabilities that are found in the larger Kenya (and which form the basis for this analysis),include the following, **erebral Palsy, Autism, Deaf – Blindness, Deafness, Developmental Delay, Emotional Disturbance, Intellectual Disability, Multiple Disabilities, Orthopedic Impairment, Speech or Language Impairment, Visual Impairment, among others.**

4. Basis for involvement of Religious bodies in Empowering Disabled Persons

4.1 The essence of participative approach in uplifting the socio-economic and political welfare of persons with disability

Article 24 of the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled Persons (of which Kenya is a signatory) states the importance of Education in the rehabilitation process for disabled persons (UN, 2011: 24). Similarly the subject of education and disability is accorded a detailed coverage in the

2011 World Report on Disability – which is a joint publication by World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank (WHO & WB, 2011: 203). The successful attainment of the Kenya Vision 2030 is largely dependent on the degree to which Kenyans are able to acquire relevant and research-driven knowledge. Some development experts assert that there is a direct correlation between a country's level of education and its extent of economic development. The reason for this, as the experts argue, is that an educated population is able to absorb ideas and skills and utilize them for enhanced participation in economic, social and political activities. This assertion reinforces the view in this paper that there is an inverse relationship between the level of education of persons with disability and their capacity to participate in self-liberating and self actualizing activities. For persons living with disability, however, the issue of access to assistive devices is equally a critical determinant as to whether they are adequately empowered to navigate their way within society, and thereby participate in the mainstream economic, social and political activities. For this to happen, society needs to undergo a form of transformation (or revolution as Mazrui (1963) calls it). To this extent, religious bodies could serve as important change agents within society.

According to the steering committee of Kenya Vision 2030, the overall goal of this vision is to develop a globally competitive and prosperous nation (Kenya) by the year 2030. This will be achieved through three main objectives as expressed through the three pillars (that is economic social and political). The three objectives are:-

- i). to drive the economy up the value chain
- ii). to invest on the people of Kenya and
- iii) to move into the future as one nation

This discussion therefore, is based on the view expressed by article 24 of the 2006 UN Convention on the rights of disabled persons and by the World Report on Disability, that disabled people have largely been excluded from the development agenda of most countries and that there is need to do everything possible to bring an end to this exclusion and drive towards removing all the barriers that perpetuate that exclusion. Hence, the guiding question here is how can religious bodies assist in this process (of removing all the barriers that have for long excluded disabled persons from active participation in mainstream activities of society)? This discussion examines ways in which Religious bodies in Kenya could assist in helping disabled people participate in the process of implementing or realizing the Kenya Vision 2030 objectives.

4.2 The need for inclusion and social justice for PWDs

In Kenya, as is the case with some other parts of Africa and the world at large, there are still numerous barriers that hinder disabled people from full participation in the economic social and political activities of society. These barriers include, but are not limited to, the following.

a) Barriers related to rehabilitation

Most African countries are faced with the problem of limited funding for disability rehabilitation programmes. For this reason, rehabilitation programmes are few and in most cases poorly staffed. Some of the rehabilitation workers are poorly trained to effectively handle their duty assignments. Other areas of concern include rigidity of or inappropriate policies, legislation and service delivery systems as well as misconceptions about disability (WHO & WB, 2011: 103/104).

b) Barriers related to transportation layout

Transportation related barriers arise from lack of a universal design, which leads to confusion as one moves from one region to another. In Kenya, efforts have been made to adopt a universal design, but these are still far from adequate (Malinda, 2005: 24). Another challenge lies in developing and enforcing laws and policies in regard to establishing an all-inclusive transport system. For instance, the issue of continuity in the public transport or travel chain poses connectivity challenges to disabled persons (UN, 2006: 22). This particular set of barriers place a significant obstacle on the mobility of disabled persons and therefore inhibits their ability to seek rehabilitation and other services. This in turn leads to limited participation among disabled people in the economic, social and political life of society (WHO & WB, 2011: 182).

c) Barriers related to information and communication technology

The most disturbing barrier in relation to information is the prevalent use of inappropriate medium of communication. For instance, majority of Religious bodies information exists in media that are not disability-friendly (Malinda, 2005:20, UN, 2006: 25). Hence, even as we speak of moving the economy up the value chain, or investing on people or moving into the future as one nation (Kenya Vision 2030), a significant number of the disabled people are virtually ignorant of such goals. They are unable to access information that can help them become active rather than passive participants in tackling these issues. Inaccessibility of information also hampers disabled persons' ability to seek and acquire relevant assistive technology. It can also negatively impact on access to education services as well as employment (WHO & WB, 2011: 186).

d) Barriers related to education

Sometimes the stringent enrollment or registration procedures and regulations bar disabled people from successfully navigating their way around the education system. The layout of the physical environment, including roads, pathways and buildings (such as offices and classrooms) are constructed in a manner completely oblivious of special needs among the disabled members of the society. As a result of low levels of accessibility in educational facilities, disabled people have high levels of illiteracy which ultimately acts as a limiting factor for access to gainful employment. This creates a kind of vicious cycle of poverty among disabled persons that keeps them in a perpetual state of underdevelopment.

4.3 Participation of religious bodies in promoting inclusion and social justice for disabled persons

In order to create space and or expand space for effective operation of disabled persons in the economic, social and political life of society, society needs to undergo drastic changes. This is the only way to make it more responsive to the needs of disabled persons. An inclusive and socially just society in which disabled people can enjoy their freedom is only possible if all sectors of society were to embrace change. Religious bodies can serve as an agent of such change through the following measures:

a) Fostering a culture of inclusion and social justice

The education system should be geared towards the eradication of such social vices as discrimination, marginalization and stigmatization which tend to create a conducive atmosphere for exclusion of certain segments of society – especially disabled persons – from active involvement in mainstream activities of society. This also means encouraging the inclusion of people with disabilities in all aspects of a community's political, social, economic and cultural life.

b) Inculcating practical skills on personal integrity

Religious education plays a key role in the process of socialization. It therefore calls for education stakeholders to come up with a well-defined and systematic approach to enculturation that stresses the need to appreciate disability.

c) Advocating for a disability-friendly environment within society

Some of the challenges that disabled persons face in society can easily be overcome if disability awareness levels within communities increase. The education system can serve as an appropriate vehicle through which pro-disability advocacy campaigns are mounted to help educate members of society as well as private and public service providers on the need to cater for the needs of disabled persons in such aspects as product design and development, service delivery system or channels, and public installations (such as buildings and transport, communication technology, among others)

d) Transforming the Religious bodies towards a disability-friendly environment

This is an inward-looking measure whereby the stakeholders of Religious bodies, particularly the policy-makers, need to identify aspects within their institutions that inhibit active and full participation among disabled persons and put in place measures that seek to alleviate or eradicate such challenges. This is particularly critical since it heralds the potential to increase school enrolment levels among disabled persons.

In the area of research, deliberate effort needs to be initiated towards innovative ways of conducting research that are disability-friendly, particularly in the area of methodology.

e) Benchmarking on disability rehabilitation

There is need to conduct research to evaluate the effectiveness of the various approaches for disability rehabilitation with a view to determining and enhancing the efficiency of rehabilitation programmes in this country. To this extent it is important to benchmark on best practices of disability rehabilitation so as to share and learn from others' experiences.

a. Promotion of disability participation

Religious bodies can transform society's view and response to disability by encouraging disabled persons to participate in Religious bodies by ensuring the creation of a disability-friendly environment within the service delivery system of these institutions. This is a measure that can lead to a significant increase in both entry and retention levels among disabled persons.

f) Conducting research on disability assistive technology

Assistive devices are significant in the life of disabled persons, especially those whose impairment adversely affects their proper functioning or participation within society. In most cases, assistive devices are completely unavailable and, if available, often at a cost too high for most disabled persons to afford or, where affordable, often ill-suited to operate within a particular locality. Innovation is required here, so as to identify or discover assistive devices that are suited for local conditions and can utilize locally available raw materials thus making them cheaper and readily available and easily affordable for disabled persons.

g) Addressing pro-disability policy gaps

Advocating for involvement of disabled persons in policy-making organs that make decisions on issues that may affect them is indeed the role for all and sundry. But Religious Education is poised to play even a greater role in bringing about significant changes within society. It is fascinating to note that some of the disabled organizations (which make important decisions that affect disabled persons) are actually run exclusively by non-disabled people.

h) Mounting community-based conscientization programmes

This is a necessary move since most of the obstacles disabled persons encounter in their bid to achieve self-reliance is related to community's attitudes towards disability. Mounting such awareness creation programmes is therefore necessary if efforts to eradicate stigma and other forms of unfair treatment or social injustices meted against people with disability are to bear the anticipated fruits. The Maua Disability Community Centre – a Church-sponsored disability rehabilitation programme, have a slogan that goes 'empower the community to empower the disabled persons'. Much of the environmental factors that militate against the ability of disabled persons to achieve self-reliance are caused by community members either consciously or unconsciously, knowingly or unknowingly. Hence there is need for community members to be educated on the importance of changing their hostile attitudes towards disabled persons.

In conclusion, it can be said that the role of Religious bodies in social transformation towards a disability-friendly set-up can be divided into two broad categories that is curative or reactive and preventive or proactive. In the first category, the role of Religious bodies is basically to deal with the effects of pre-transformation period when disabled people operate under unfriendly socio-economic religio-cultural and political conditions. These may include such interventions as creation of a legal framework to cushion them from further mistreatment or misery. In the second category, it is envisaged that a strategic viewpoint will be embraced so that all those factors within society that act as barriers in the way for disabled people's ability to achieve their self-realisation are totally eliminated.

Conclusion

The role of religious bodies in uplifting the lives of people with disability is very critical. In conclusion, the discussion contained in this paper seeks to highlight the need for members. It is by the level to which religious bodies have succeeded in mainstreaming the needs of persons with disability that their overall performance in the earthly ministry should be measured. People with disability in Kenya are still largely living outside the mainstream of social, economic and political life of society. Religious leaders are the closest located at the grassroots and are often the first ones to whom reports on cases of disability are channeled. This places them at a crucial vantage point in leading the campaign towards effective social inclusion and justice for all people, particularly the marginalized and vulnerable groups like the PWDs.

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