

Unlocking Potential

Examining the Effectiveness of Non-Governmental Organisations in Empowering People with Disabilities in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Despite the world's remarkable strides towards reducing poverty, increasing literacy and reaching other development goals, people with disabilities have been left behind. In Zimbabwe, they face daily struggles with poverty and inequality, exacerbated by economic instability and inadequate government policies. With limited access to basic needs like healthcare, education and job opportunities, persons with disabilities (PWDs) are among the most marginalised groups in the country.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are a beacon of hope for people with disabilities, offering crucial rehabilitation programs designed to empower them to actively participate in community activities and have a voice in decision-making processes. However, despite numerous efforts, the improvement in the lives of PWDs in Zimbabwe remains elusive.

This article sheds light on the reasons behind the ineffective efforts of NGOs in empowering people with disabilities in Zimbabwe. Drawing on Friere's empowering theory as a theoretical foundation, the study employs a qualitative research approach, collecting both primary and secondary data from sources such as academic journals, previous



studies, media stories and NGO archives. Through personal interviews with NGO representatives, key informants, and people with disabilities, the study concludes that the absence of political will, weak legal framework and persistent cultural beliefs are obstructing the success of NGO programs in improving the lives of PWDs.

Keywords: *Persons with disabilities, Non- Governmental Organisations, Zimbabwe, Empowerment, Political will, Legal framework*

INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe, People with Disabilities (PWDs) face several challenges, including discrimination, poverty, and exclusion from decision-making processes. Despite efforts by the government and international institutions, people with disabilities continue to struggle for equal treatment and opportunities (Choguya 2021). Poverty and inequality are daily realities for many people with disabilities in the country. According to Khupe *et al.* (2022), the situation is worsened by the current political climate and the poor relations that exist between the government and various international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

The quest to empower people with disabilities has gathered prominence over the past years. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) play a crucial role in empowering PWDs globally, providing them with institutional care, financial assistance, and a barrier-free environment (Kandyomunda *et al.* 2002). However, despite numerous programs and initiatives, the effectiveness of NGOs in improving the lives of PWDs in Zimbabwe remains questionable.

This study aims to explore the impact of NGOs on the lives of PWDs in Zimbabwe and to identify ways to improve their effectiveness in empowering this marginalised community. Through examining the challenges faced by PWDs, the programmes offered by

NGOs, and the impact of these programmes, this study provides crucial insights on how to work towards creating a more inclusive society for all. The study was carried out to address the following questions:

- what are the challenges faced by PWDs in Zimbabwe?
- what are the programmes provided by NGOs to empower people with disabilities in Zimbabwe?



- how effective are the various programmes implemented by Non-Governmental Organisations to empower people with disabilities in Zimbabwe?

DEFINITION OF A PERSON WITH DISABILITY

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), as stated in the United Nations General Assembly (2006), defines persons with disabilities as “... 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.” The CRPD acknowledges that disability cannot solely be attributed to the individual, as societal factors also play a significant role. For example, a person who uses a wheelchair may encounter difficulties in securing employment not due to their health condition, but because of environmental barriers, such as inaccessible staircases at the workplace, that make it difficult for them to be employed (Ofuani 2011; Oliver 2013). Hence, the CRPD acknowledges that disability is a complex interaction between an individual’s health and their environment.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

The global prevalence of disability is estimated to affect 15% of the world’s population, with over one billion individuals affected (UNDP 2018). A disproportionate amount of this population, approximately 80%, resides in developing countries. More so, in Zimbabwe, the prevalence of disability is 9.2%, with approximately 1.4 million individuals out of the country’s population of 15.2 million living with some form of disability (ZIMSTAT 2022). Zimbabwe was one of the first African nations to enact disability legislation¹ and has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), an international protocol aimed at protecting the rights and promoting the inclusion of individuals with disabilities.

CHALLENGES FACED BY PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN ZIMBABWE

It is imperative that society addresses the various challenges faced by PWDs in Zimbabwe. These individuals are often subjected to various forms of discrimination and marginalisation, which hinder their ability to live a normal life. One of the most significant challenges encountered by PWDs in Zimbabwe is the lack of proper documentation. For



instance, some parents do not register the births of their children with disabilities, making it difficult for them to access essential services such as social assistance and disability benefits (Khupe *et al.* 2022).

Moreover, Ndhlovu & Mudzingwa (2022) highlight that many children with disabilities are kept isolated from the outside world, which not only perpetuates the stigmatisation associated with disability but also denies them the opportunity to interact and engage with society. The lack of access to education is another significant challenge faced by children with disabilities in Zimbabwe. According to Mandicheta, Mabvurira & Ndebele (2019), only 25% of children with disabilities complete primary education, with one in three children with disabilities being out of school altogether. The Education Act (1987) provides that education is a right and compulsory for all children of school-going age, but it does not accommodate children with disabilities. Consequently, most teachers who graduate from Zimbabwean teacher colleges lack the necessary skills to teach students with disabilities (Chidemo, Chindimba & Matongo 2018).

Furthermore, the lack of adequate representation of individuals with disabilities in parliament is another major challenge faced by this marginalised group. The Zimbabwean constitution provides for the appointment of two individuals with disabilities as senators, but this is not enough, given the sheer number of individuals with disabilities in Zimbabwe (Government of Zimbabwe 2013). Additionally, individuals with disabilities often face challenges in accessing justice due to the lack of accessibility in the justice delivery system (Ndhlovu & Mudzingwa 2022).

Lastly, the cultural norms and stereotypes associated with disability also play a significant role in perpetuating discrimination and marginalisation. For instance, many individuals with disabilities have turned to street begging as a means of livelihood, and society still perceives them as dependent and hopeless (Chitiyo & Chitiyo 2019). It is essential that society works towards changing these cultural norms and stereotypes, to create a more inclusive and accommodating society for PWDs in Zimbabwe.

DISABILITY AND THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN ZIMBABWE

In recent years, the Zimbabwean government has demonstrated its commitment to promoting the rights of PWDs through a series of legislative and policy measures. In 2013, the government took a significant step in this direction by signing and ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which



provides a comprehensive framework for the protection and promotion of the rights of PWDs (Ndhlovu & Mudzingwa 2022).

Furthermore, the government has also ratified several international treaties that promote human rights, and these include the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Beijing Platform for Action (Ndhlovu & Mudzingwa, 2022). These international treaties not only underscore the importance of protecting the rights of PWDs, but also emphasise their full participation in socio-economic activities.

The promotion of the rights of PWDs in Zimbabwe is enshrined in the nation's constitution and further reinforced through the Disabled Persons Act (DPA). These legislative frameworks serve as the cornerstone for protecting the rights of PWDs, and are explained below.

The constitution of Zimbabwe

The Constitution of Zimbabwe affirms its commitment to the protection and promotion of the rights of all citizens, including persons with disabilities (PWDs), through the guarantee of equality and the prohibition of discrimination based on disability (Government of Zimbabwe 2013). This commitment is reflected in a dedicated section, Section 83, devoted to the rights of PWDs. Section 83 provides that:

The State must take appropriate measures, within the limits of the resources available to it, to ensure that persons with disabilities realize their full mental and physical potential, including measures: To enable them to become self-reliant; (a) To enable them to live with their families and participate in social, creative or recreational activities; (b) To protect them from all forms of exploitation and abuse; (c) To give them access to medical, psychological and functional treatment; (d) To provide special facilities for their education; and (e) To provide State-funded education and training where they need it (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013: 39)

The section demonstrates a commitment to ensure that PWDs enjoy their rights just like any other citizens. While this section acknowledges the economic and social rights of PWDs, it stipulates that the realisation of these rights is dependent on the state's available resources. However, it does not give due emphasis on the state's obligation to ensure that these rights are actualised.



The Constitution of Zimbabwe recognises the inherent worth and dignity of all citizens, as well as their equal rights and freedoms, as enshrined in section 3 (Government of Zimbabwe 2013). Furthermore, the same section acknowledges the rights of PWDs as a foundational value and principle of the country. Section 22 of the constitution imposes a legal obligation on all government institutions to respect and uphold the rights of PWDs, including their right to be treated with dignity and respect (Government of Zimbabwe 2013). This provision serves to reinforce the inherent worth of every person and underscores the importance of treating PWDs with dignity and respect.

Moreover, the Constitution of Zimbabwe mandates government institutions to prioritise the specific needs of PWDs in their development plans and to take necessary measures to ensure that government buildings and facilities are easily accessible to them (Government of Zimbabwe 2013). This reflects a commitment to promoting the rights of PWDs and ensuring that they are able to fully participate in society on an equal footing with others.

In conclusion, the constitution of Zimbabwe provides a strong legal framework for safeguarding and promoting the rights of PWDs. By recognising their inherent worth, as well as their right to be accorded respect and dignity, the constitution serves as a powerful tool for promoting a more inclusive and equitable society for all.

The Disabled Persons Act (DPA)

The Disabled Persons Act of 1992 is the central piece of legislation that endeavours to address the challenges faced by PWDs in Zimbabwe. However, the Act has been a subject of critique by several scholars and disability rights activists. The act's use of the term "disabled person" has been deemed offensive and derogatory (Chidemo, Chindimba & Matongo 2018; Ndhlovu & Mudzingwa 2022). The Act defines a disabled person as:

[A] person with a physical, mental or sensory disability, including a visual, hearing or speech functional disability, which gives rise to physical, cultural or social barriers inhibiting him from participating at an equal level with other members of society in activities, undertakings or fields of employment that are open to other members of society (Disabled Persons Act 5 of 1992:2)

It is evident that the current definition of disability as outlined in the Act fails to fully encompass the complexity of the issue. The definition is limited in its scope, focusing solely on individual impairments without taking into consideration the impact of environmental barriers. It is important to recognise that disability is not simply a characteristic of the



individual, but rather a result of the interaction between the person and their surroundings (Chidemo, Chindimba & Matongo 2018).

Furthermore, the Disabled Persons Act (1992) provides for the establishment of the National Disability Board (NDB). Its membership comprises of organisations representing PWDs and representatives from various government ministries, among others (Sande 2019). However, it is important to note that the appointment of NBD members, including those representing PWDs, is ultimately in the hands of the Minister of Labour and Social Welfare. This grants the minister significant authority over disability issues, leaving PWDs with limited representation in decision-making processes that have a direct impact on their lives.

According to Choguya (2021), the primary function of the NDB is to promote equal opportunities for PWDs through the creation of policies aimed at ensuring access to education, employment, and socio-cultural activities. The NDB also holds the power to issue adjustment orders, which are meant to assist PWDs in accessing basic public services. In instances where public buildings or services are inaccessible to PWDs, the NDB has the authority to issue an adjustment order, demanding the owners take action to ensure accessibility (Sande 2019). The violation of an adjustment order is considered a criminal offense, as is denying PWDs access to public-accessible buildings or services (Chimedza & Peters 1999).Top of Form

Furthermore, the Disabled Persons Act (1992) has faced criticism for its lack of enforcement and its reliance on the medical model of disability. According to Kuper *et al.* (2022), section 7(8) of the Act, which criminalises non-compliance with adjustment orders, has not resulted in a single prosecution. Additionally, adjustment orders cannot be issued to government institutions without the approval of the relevant minister, making compliance dependent on political will. Critics argue that the Act serves as a cosmetic piece of legislation and does not grant any rights to People with Disabilities or impose any obligations on the government (Bongo *et al.* 2019; Mandicheta, Mabvurira & Ndebele 2019; Kuper *et al.* 2022). The medical approach to disability, which views PWDs as objects for medical intervention, also perpetuates discrimination and disempowers people with disabilities (Ndhlovu & Mudzingwa 2022).

In conclusion, the Zimbabwean government's efforts to advance the rights of PWDs are commendable, as they demonstrate its recognition of the importance of promoting and protecting the rights of all its citizens. Through the signing and ratification of these international treaties and conventions, the government has signalled its commitment to creating an inclusive society where PWDs are able to enjoy their rights and participate fully in all aspects of life.



However, it is essential to continue monitoring the implementation of these measures and to ensure that the government remains accountable to its obligations under these international treaties. This will help to ensure that PWDs are able to enjoy their rights and participate fully in socio-economic activities, thereby contributing to an inclusive and equitable society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FREIRE'S EMPOWERMENT THEORY

The study was informed by Paulo Freire's empowerment theory, which posits that poverty is a result of a culture of silence and lack of voice among marginalised groups. As Freire (1970) argued, these groups can regain their voice through a process of raising consciousness achieved through dialogue and problem-posing education. Freire (1972) believed that it was important for the oppressed to see their situation not as a closed world with no way out, but as a limiting situation that can be transformed. This view is in line with Freire's belief that poor people have the capacity to change their circumstances, and that this process begins with the awakening of critical consciousness (Freire 1970).

According to Freire (1970), the awakening of critical consciousness is a crucial step in the process of empowering marginalised groups. He identified three main ways to accomplish this: Firstly, the people must be made aware of their situation, secondly, they must examine the root causes of their oppression and thirdly, they must take action in accordance with the principles of social justice (Freire 1970).

Although Freire's empowerment theory has not explicitly addressed the issue of empowering persons with disabilities, it can be adapted for this purpose. Freire believed that people have the capability to understand and make decisions about their contextual reality (Stromquist 1995). This involves creating awareness about their condition and the willingness to act based on this knowledge. Ofuani (2011) argues that Freire's theory can be useful in the context of disability by creating an appropriate atmosphere and selecting the best methods to empower PWDs to articulate their interests and take creative and proactive actions.

Furthermore, Luttrell *et al.* (2009) applied Freire's theory to understand and operationalise the empowerment of PWDs. They developed their own empowerment model that seeks to assist excluded social groups, including PWDs, to gain more control over their lives and taking part in decision-making processes that affect their lives (Luttrell *et al.*

2009). According to Luttrell *et al.* (2009), empowerment is a radical transformation process that aims to enable PWDs to assert their rights and have equal access to resources. Their model views PWDs as individuals who possess competencies but require external resources to manifest their capabilities (Luttrell *et al.* 2009). The model advocates for granting PWDs rights and providing the necessary social structure and resources to exercise these rights.

However, Luttrell *et al.* (2009)'s model has faced criticisms for not taking into consideration the degree of the severity of the disability (Ofuani 2011; Bongo *et al.* 2019; Mandicheta, Mabvurira & Ndebele 2019). According to Ofuani (2011), some PWDs, regardless of the size and number of empowerment initiatives, may not be able to operate independently. Additionally, it may be impossible to employ individuals with certain types and levels of disabilities. These critiques highlight the limitations of the model in addressing the complex reality of empowering PWDs.

EMPOWERMENT OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

According to Ofuani (2011), empowerment is the process through which PWDs acquire the skills to take control of every aspect of their lives. It entails providing PWDs with the resources, skills and knowledge necessary to enhance their capacity to determine their own future. Furthermore, it involves presenting them with a variety of opportunities to understand their environment and participate in crucial decisions that shape their destinies (Stromquist 1995). In other words, PWDs must be treated equally before the law and accorded equal opportunities to better themselves through employment, education, and other means, without discrimination, just like every other individual.

Pursuant to Luttrell *et al.* (2009) empowerment can be categorised into four main dimensions which are economic empowerment, human and social empowerment, political empowerment and cultural empowerment. Economic empowerment aims to assist PWDs with skills and resources to ensure that they have access to viable sources of incomes (Luttrell *et al.* 2009). Furthermore, as explained by Piron & Watkins (2004), political empowerment occurs when people with disabilities act collectively to fight for their rights and entitlements. Moreover, human and social empowerment aims to ensure that people with disabilities are able to define the course of their lives and are able to act on matters that affect them (Page & Czuba 1999). In addition, according to Luttrell *et al.* (2009), cultural empowerment involves redefining certain cultural norms and values, as well as changing certain symbolic practices that discriminate against people with disabilities.



In conclusion, the empowerment of PWDs is an essential aspect of ensuring that they take control of their own lives and participate in society without discrimination. Through the provision of resources, skills, and knowledge, PWDs can achieve economic, political, human and social, and cultural empowerment. These various dimensions of empowerment provide a comprehensive approach to enabling PWDs to live fulfilling lives, free from discrimination and inequality. Top of Form

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Green & Matthias (1996:25) define Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs) as "... constituted, with are formally constituted, with a primarily non-profit-seeking objective of a group or community wider than the direct membership of the organisation and with a decision-making authority independent of government." They include groups and institutions that are wholly or substantially independent of the government and whose primary objectives are humanitarian or cooperative rather than commercial (Larsen and Ytzen 1990)

Vulnerable groups, including PWDs, have always required assistance from voluntary organisations to articulate their issues. NGOs play a crucial role in empowering these groups by working with governments to tackle public problems, oversee public policies, and encourage active participation in development efforts (UNDP 2009). They also fill the voids left by governments in protecting the rights of PWDs through effective implementation of various strategies. Furthermore, NGOs aim to make vulnerable individuals self-sufficient by offering essential services. According to Kandyomunda *et al.* (2002), Non- Governmental Organisations tend to work in small geographical areas, thereby achieving significant impact on the ground.

CLASSIFICATION OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

According to Kandyomunda *et al.* (2002), in Zimbabwe, there are various types of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that address disability concerns. The size of these NGOs ranges from small to those that achieve national prominence due to their large scale and broad scope of operation. There are three broad categories of NGOs in this field, namely: Organizations for Persons with Disabilities, Organizations of Persons with Disabilities, and Organizations of Parents of Children with Disabilities (Kandyomunda *et al.* 2002).



ORGANISATIONS FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

These are the oldest category of NGOs, typically founded by philanthropists or religious groups, and they tend to specifically target certain impairment groups (Kandyomunda *et al.* 2002). According to Oliver (2013), they employ the medical model of disability, which focuses primarily on the individual and responds to his or her needs using a strictly medical approach. Consequently, these NGOs emphasise services such as medical care and rehabilitation.

Organisations of Persons with Disabilities

According to Kandyomunda *et al.* (2002), Disabled Persons' Organisations (DPOs) are representative organisations of PWDs, where PWDs make up the majority of staff, board members, and volunteers. DPOs work towards eliminating barriers that affect the lives of PWDs and they employ the social model of disability. They have a strong advocacy orientation and they usually adopt the motto "nothing about us, without us" (Kandyomunda *et al.* 2002). DPOs usually focus on a specific type of disability, such as working with the deaf, and in some cases, different DPOs merge to form a national umbrella organisation.

According to UNDP (2020), in Zimbabwe, there are two national umbrella organisations, the National Association of Societies for the Care of the Handicapped (NASCOH) and the Federation of Organisations of Disabled People in Zimbabwe (FODPZ). NASCOH's functions include capacity building for PWDs, advocating for disability-friendly legislation, coordinating the activities of various organisations representing PWDs, conducting research, and providing information and advice to the government and other relevant entities on disability issues (Ruffin *et al.* 2020). On the other hand, FODPZ consolidates the voices of PWDs and their organisations, collaborates with other civil society organisations, the government, and local authorities to advocate for inclusive development (UNDP 2020).

Organisations/Associations of Parents of Children with Disabilities

Associations founded by parents of children with disabilities play an important role in the provision of education for children with disabilities. According to (Oliver 2013), they aim to promote inclusion and equal opportunities for children with disabilities. These organisations are formed in response to the fact that the concerns of children do not usually align with the focus of adult oriented DPOs or other organisations for people with disabilities.



METHODOLOGY

This article utilises qualitative research methodology to contextualise the personal and lived experiences of PWDs in the context of their struggle for empowerment. Both primary and secondary data sources were utilised in the study.

Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews with 10 PWDs and 5 representatives of Non-Governmental Organisations, selected from members of Disabled Persons Organisations in Zimbabwe. The focus of the interviews was on capturing the lived experiences of PWDs. Additionally, 5 key informants were interviewed to provide perspectives on the effectiveness of NGOs in empowering PWDs. The use of in-depth interviews as a data collection technique was chosen because it is likely to provide high-quality data, is time and cost-effective, and can elicit responses to questions when other techniques may fail (Creswell & Miller 2000).

For ethical reasons, pseudonyms were used in the study, with symbols such as (PWD1, PWD2, PWD3,....., PWD10) to represent the first to the tenth person with a disability, respectively. Similarly, (NGO₁, NGO₂,.....,NGO₅) represented the first to the fifth representative of NGOs, respectively, and (KI₁, KI₂,.....,KI₅) symbolised the first to the fifth key informant, respectively.

The study also made use of secondary data collected through a desk review of previous studies and key international and national documents on disability issues. Top of Form

DATA MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS

Data collected was analysed qualitatively. Interview responses were transcribed, checked for accuracy and then analysed using content analysis. The narratives and perspectives of respondents were analysed and presented verbatim. The researchers applied (Miles & Huberman 1994)'s recommendations to analyse the data. Thus, the following steps were followed:

- the data were read multiple times to obtain a general overview;
- data were read verbatim, highlighting text that captured key ideas and concepts;
- the key concepts were used to generate codes.; and
- codes were classified and grouped into clusters based on how they were related and linked.

The collected data were coded using broad themes. According to Braun & Clark (2006), using thematic analysis allows one to explore the potential connections that exist between different phenomena. “This gives the researchers more insight, in-depth knowledge and a better understanding of all identified and underlying issues, themes, concepts and ideas,” (Braun & Clark 2006:77).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section presents the results of the research that was conducted to assess the effectiveness of NGOs in empowering people with disabilities in Zimbabwe. The results are based on the data collected through in-depth interviews with 10 individuals with disabilities, 5 key informants, and 5 representatives from NGOs. The findings from this study provide an in-depth analysis of the challenges faced by people with disabilities in Zimbabwe and the efforts made by NGOs to address them. These results are essential in understanding the current state of empowerment of PWDs in Zimbabwe and provide a basis for future policy recommendations and interventions aimed at promoting the rights and wellbeing of people living with disabilities.

Theme 1: Challenges faced by Persons with Disabilities in Zimbabwe

An empirical analysis of the data under this theme revealed that Persons with disabilities often face transport challenges. Respondent PWD3 indicated that “when I use public transport, I am forced to pay a fare for my wheelchair as well, meaning that I pay a double fare.” He indicated that this strains his budget as he must commute to and from work every day. This was corroborated by respondent PWD7 who pointed out that “I am visually impaired, and I move around with my assistant. However, when I board public transport, I am required to pay an additional fare for my assistant.” These findings concur with the conclusions reached by various scholarly sources, including Bongo *et al.* (2019), Chikate (2020), Musengi (2021), and Khupe *et al.* (2022), that Zimbabwe’s public transport system is not easily accessible to PWDs and falls short in adequately accommodating their needs. According to Musengi (2021), some public transportation providers actively avoid serving PWDs due to the design of their vehicles, which can be difficult for these individuals to board. In addition to this, PWDs face other barriers to using public transportation, including inconvenient bus stop locations, long queues at bus terminals, and difficulties in reading traffic and pedestrian signs (Chikate 2020). Given the crucial role that mobility plays in enabling PWDs to live independently, these findings highlight the importance of improving accessibility in Zimbabwe’s public transportation system.



Moreover, the respondents also indicated that PWDs often find it difficult to secure employment due to the discriminatory tendencies which employers have towards people with disabilities. Respondent KI₂ indicated that “given the current economic hardships, persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe find it difficult to secure employment. The law does not adequately protect the employment rights of people with disabilities. The Zimbabwean constitution does not grant people with disabilities any special right to employment, and it does not impose any obligation on the state to protect and advance such right.” The same sentiments were also echoed by respondent NGO₁, who elaborated that “the Disabled Persons Act is ineffective in promoting the rights of PWDs to employment. Although it prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in employment, the DPA does not grant any substantive employment rights to PWDs.” She further argued that Zimbabwe’s Labour Act [Chapter 28:01] merely protects PWDs from discrimination, but it fails to impose an obligation on the state to actively advance and safeguard their right to employment.

Respondent PWD1 also indicated that PWDs suffer from discrimination when seeking employment. She narrated her story as follows; “every time I go for an interview, I come back disheartened. When interviewers become aware of my disability, they frequently ask insensitive and demeaning questions, such as whether I believe I am capable of handling the job-related pressure given my condition” She stated that she has since stopped applying for jobs because she has lost hope. Another respondent (PWD4) also concurred and pointed that there is discrimination at his workplace. He narrated thus: “After 15 years of dedicated service to the same organisation, I have observed a persistent pattern of discrimination in the promotion process. Despite having trained several junior employees, many of whom have since been promoted, I have not received a similar advancement. It appears that promotions are awarded based on physical ability rather than qualifications, as I have witnessed several less-qualified colleagues receive promotions simply because they have no disability.”

These findings align with those of Chikate (2020), who demonstrated that people with disabilities (PWDs) often face difficulty securing formal employment due to a lack of requisite academic qualifications. This conclusion is further supported by the work of Mandicheta, Mabvurira, and Ndebele (2019), who found that PWDs are disproportionately underrepresented in high-paying, highly skilled professions and are more likely to work in low-paying, low-skilled positions. These researchers posit that PWDs are presented with fewer opportunities for advancement in their careers compared to their counterparts without disabilities. When PWDs fail to find employment, this creates more social and economic problems for them. Unemployment is a source of poverty and social deprivation, as unemployed people are vulnerable to economic shocks and natural disasters, such as drought.

Furthermore, an analysis of data collected revealed that there are several myths surrounding disability in Zimbabwe that have led to the stigmatisation of PWDs. According to PWD1, people with mental and intellectual disabilities are sometimes identified using derogatory names such as ‘idiots,’ ‘mentally retarded’ or ‘imbeciles.’ This was supported by KI₄ who indicated that, “in rural communities, there is a widespread perception that disabilities are the result of witchcraft, either inflicted by enemies or as punishment for immoral behaviour. As a result of these beliefs, there is a marked lack of public empathy towards persons with disabilities, and little effort is made to facilitate their integration into mainstream society.” These findings align with those from Chitiyo and Chitiyo (2019) and Chinhanu, Chivandikwa, and Seda (2021), who concluded that in Zimbabwe, disability is frequently associated with witchcraft, and that mothers may be divorced for giving birth to a child with a disability. Additionally, Chitiyo and Chitiyo (2019) reported that families of people with disabilities may be hesitant to discuss their issues publicly, due to the stigma and humiliation they face as a result of negative societal attitudes. This is a pressing issue, as negative views towards individuals with disabilities are pervasive among the Zimbabwean population, including among the enlightened and literate. Addressing this challenge requires the collaborative efforts of various stakeholders to promote a shift towards a more accepting and inclusive attitude towards people with disabilities.

Additionally, respondents also indicated that PWDs face challenges in accessing basic education. Most of the participants highlighted that the education system is flawed in that it does not take account of the special needs of PWDs. For instance, KI₃ argued that “according to estimates, 32% of individuals with disabilities in Zimbabwe have not received any form of formal education. While the Zimbabwean Constitution, under Section 83, advocates for the establishment of special schools for individuals with disabilities, this falls short in fully embracing the concept of inclusive education.” The same sentiments were also shared by respondent NGO₂ who argued that “the idea of special schools works against the concept of inclusive education. This approach perpetuates the discrimination of children with disabilities, as it confines them to separate institutions where they are not able to interact and engage with others.”

Furthermore, PWD4 indicated that in rural areas, children with disabilities fail to attend schools because most of the schools are very far away and inaccessible. He added that most of the children with disabilities require special schools, but such schools are very few in the country and they cannot accommodate everyone.

Respondents also mentioned that many teachers in ordinary schools are not adequately trained to teach students who require special educational needs. This confirms the findings by Chidemo, Chindimba & Matongo (2018) who concluded that inclusive education



is not a component of most of the Zimbabwean teacher colleges' curriculum and teachers have not been trained on how to teach students with disabilities.

Moreover, respondents also reported that PWDs are poorly represented in political, social and economic spheres. Respondent PWD8 argued that "the current quota for people with disabilities in parliament is insufficiently low. At the moment, only two people with disabilities hold seats in the Senate, while there is no such representation in the house of national assembly." This sentiment was echoed by respondent PWD1, who suggested that the appointment of only two Members of Parliament with disabilities is a ridicule of PWDs. He further highlighted that "disability issues are being handled by people without disabilities and one wonders what they can do for us without us." This finding corroborates the findings by Smythe *et al.* (2022) who argued that people with disabilities are rarely given a platform to air their concerns.

Respondents also indicated that one of the major challenges facing PWDs in Zimbabwe is the weak legal framework. For instance, respondent NGO₂ argued that "the greatest challenge facing Zimbabwe in terms of safeguarding the rights of persons with disabilities (PWDs) is the conditional nature of legal statutes. The laws in place require the state to ensure the realisation of these rights, but only if sufficient resources are available. Despite this obligation, the availability of resources to fulfil these commitments remains uncertain." She added that the government lacks the political will to improve the lives of PWDs. This was also supported by respondent KI₂ who argued that "the law provides that the government should promote the rights of persons with disabilities subject to the availability of resources. The government will always argue that it is unable to address the issues of PWDs due to unavailability of resources." He added that there is a general belief by PWDs that the government wants to avoid absolute responsibility. Several scholars who include (Rukuni *et al.* 2018; Kuper *et al.* 2022; Smythe *et al.* 2022) have also concluded that Zimbabwe's legal framework does not adequately address the challenges of PWDs. For instance, Kuper *et al.* 2022 argue that the Disabled Persons Act (1992) is merely a cosmetic piece of legislation enacted to muzzle people with disabilities because the government has made no commitments to empowering them.

Furthermore, respondents also indicated that PWDs face various physical and accessibility challenges. Respondent PWD1 pointed out that in some remote areas, people with mobility impairment use wheelbarrows because they cannot afford to buy wheelchairs. Respondent PWD2 highlighted that many government premises and state recreational facilities are inaccessible to persons with disabilities. More so, respondent KI₃ reported that "because of high unemployment and poor salaries, the majority of the people with disabilities cannot afford to buy such aides and appliances. Sunscreen products, such as

skin lotions, are prohibitively expensive and inaccessible for individuals with albinism.” He also indicated that people with visual impairment often fail to access information in appropriate formats such as Braille.

Theme 2: Effectiveness of NGOs in the empowerment of PWDs: NGO representative perspective

Respondents were also asked about their opinion with regards to the effectiveness of Non-Governmental Organisations in the empowerment of PWDs. This section summarises the responses from NGO representatives.

According to the NGO representatives who were interviewed, NGOs have been instrumental in implementing various programmes meant to empower PWDs in Zimbabwe. They indicated that NGOs provide various health programmes, socio-economic programmes, educational programmes, technical projects and sports programmes to uplift the lives of persons with disabilities. For instance, respondent NGO₁ pointed out that Non-Governmental Organisations have tremendously improved the lives of PWD over the past two decades. She added that the programmes offered by NGOs have enabled PWDs to participate in local community development activities. Respondent NGO₂ suggested that “NGOs provide PWDs with knowledge of their rights. They also play a crucial role in modifying the attitudes of people with disabilities towards community issues.” The same sentiments were also echoed by respondent NGO₄ who indicated that the programmes implemented by NGOs have assisted PWDs in altering their negative attitudes community development issues. He argued that “many PWDs now participate in development programmes, and we now have several successful businesses that are owned by PWDs which were funded by NGOs.”

Furthermore, respondent NGO₅ highlighted that they have enhanced the skills of people with disabilities. He added that the programmes offered by NGOs have “taught people with disabilities on how to market their goods in their communities.” He also argued that the various cooperative programmes implemented by NGOs have provided PWDs with opportunities to benefit from the experience of others in addressing their issues. Respondent NGO₃ also noted that the programmes offered by NGOs assisted people with disabilities to develop their hobbies and interests. He argued that “people with disabilities can now participate in national sports competitions which are sponsored by Non-Governmental Organisation.” He gave an example of Elliot Mujaji, an athlete with a disability who got sponsorship from various NGOs and won two gold medals in the paralympic games. NGO₃ added that NGOs also educate and train family members of PWDs on how to handle and integrate persons with disabilities.



The responses from NGO representatives demonstrate that these institutions are playing a very important role in empowering people with disabilities. These programmes help to integrate PWDs into the community. The findings corroborate with various scholars such as (Kandyomunda *et al.* 2002; Ofuani 2011; Khupe *et al.* 2022) who acknowledge the important role played by NGOs in addressing disability issues.

The NGO representatives were also asked about the factors that hindered the success of their interventions. Respondent NGO₅ indicated that “the absence of a comprehensive national database for persons with disabilities (PWDs) poses a challenge for the government in planning and executing policies aimed at empowering this vulnerable group.” He argued that NGOs are unable to determine the accurate number and geographical distribution of PWDs in Zimbabwe, and this hinders the implementation of effective empowerment strategies. He suggested that a national survey for persons with disabilities be conducted to compile an accurate national database.

Furthermore, respondent NGO₃ highlighted the fact that several donors have withdrawn their support from Zimbabwe due to the current political climate. He emphasised that the strict conditions attached to donor funds can impede the successful implementation of various programs. Additionally, a representative from NGO₂ noted that the Zimbabwean government’s interference in their operations often hinders progress. She stated that “at times, our ability to freely execute projects in rural areas is restricted, as they are inaccurately perceived as political campaigns for opposition political parties.”

Moreover, respondent PWD1 indicated that some of their programmes fail because of the negative attitude of some of the PWDs. She stated that “sometimes, PWDs desire an easier life and they may wish to continue taking advantage of their disability through handouts and donations. For example, in certain rural communities, people with disabilities have become accustomed to receiving aid from organisations such as the World Food Programme, resulting in the development of a dependent culture which makes it challenging for non-governmental organisations to sustain empowerment initiatives.” She argued that some PWDs are not willing to work and if they are given capital to start income-generating projects, they embezzle the funds.

Theme 3: Effectiveness of NGOs in the empowerment of PWDs: Perspective of PWDs

PWDs who were interviewed pointed out that the various programmes offered by NGOs enabled them to establish social relationships within their communities. Respondent PWD2 indicated that “NGOs educate us on healthy habits solve our own problems and

we no longer rely on donor funding.” Moreover, PWD1 mentioned that “NGO education programmes helped to boost my confidence. I used to feel socially insecure but now, I just feel like anyone else, and I express gratitude for their initiatives.” Generally, responses from PWDs indicated that NGOs are assisting people with disabilities to improve their skills. Some NGOs also employ people with disabilities, and this improves their livelihoods. This is supported by previous studies such as (Chidemo, Chindimba & Matongo 2018; Chitiyo & Chitiyo 2019; Chinhanu, Chivandikwa & Seda 2021) who also highlighted the importance of NGOs in the enhancement of lives of PWDs.

Moreover, PWDs were asked about the effectiveness of the various programmes that are being offered by NGOs to empower them. Respondent PWD2 indicated that “some of the projects of non-governmental organisations are not sustainable, as they do not last for a long time. Most of the NGOs only effect superficial change in the societies in which they operate.” She added that the lack of sustainability is caused by several factors which include poor monitoring and evaluation and lack of funding.

Furthermore, respondents PWD3 and PWD7 indicated that the programmes are not effective because some NGOs have negative attitudes toward persons with disabilities. Respondent PWD3 argued that many NASCOH member organisations are the chief culprits in the discrimination of PWDs. He stated that “it is unfortunate that a significant number of persons with disabilities who are employed by NGOs and who possess valuable skills in certain areas are not given opportunities for advancement due solely to their physical condition.” The same sentiments were shared by respondent PWD10 who argued that “disability has become a fundraising venture for some people without disabilities who abuse PWDs to raise funds for themselves. For example, at NASCO, PWDs are rarely promoted to higher positions, yet the organisation uses them to obtain funding from donors.” He indicated that most of the NGOs are led by people without disabilities and they implement strategies that benefit them at the expense of PWDs. Respondent PWD10 added that people with disabilities are being used to rubber stamp decisions that do not fully express their rights.

Theme 4: Effectiveness of NGOs in the empowerment of PWDs: Perspective of Key Informants

The five key informants were also asked about the effectiveness of PWDs in the empowerment of PWDs. Respondent KI₁ argued that “it is a well-known fact that Non-Governmental Organisations don’t always perform a comprehensive needs assessment that involves the intended beneficiaries. The majority of projects executed by these



organisations are primarily shaped by the funding parties, who seldom seek the input of the recipients prior to implementation. This approach often results in the inadequacy of the projects to meet the requirements and expectations of the recipients.” This corroborates with the findings by Chofi (2010:15) who notes that “there are allegations that NGOs impose their projects on people with disabilities before carrying out any preliminary need assessment to identify their priority needs.” Consequently, funds are sometimes wasted on projects that do not benefit the people with disabilities.

Respondent KI₃ indicated that most NGO programmes fail because there is no political will on part of the government to empower PWDs. He argued that even within the government’s own structures, most of the key decision-making positions related to disability are held by people without disabilities. KI₃ added that for NGOs to succeed in empowering PWDs, they require support from the government. However, if the government is not willing to come on board, the efforts of NGOs are likely to fail.

Furthermore, respondent KI₄ argued that NGOs are failing to achieve some of their objectives because of the poor legal framework. He expressed his disappointment to the fact that “the country was still using the outdated Disabled Persons Act which is out of touch with the realities on the ground. He added that “I am deeply concerned that the government hastily launch the national disability policy last year without first implementing the required legal framework. This is tantamount to building a house that has no foundation, it is not sustainable.” This was also supported by KI₂ who indicated that NGOs were being let down by the country’s legal framework. He also argued that if the current Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment Bill is passed into law, this is going to further stifle the operations of NGOs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Firstly, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CPRD) advocates for the full participation of PWDs in all aspects of disability-related matters. In line with this, the government, having ratified the CRPD in 2013, must incorporate its provisions into domestic law to serve as a reference for both the government and other relevant stakeholders in promoting the empowerment of PWDs.

Furthermore, in response to reported instances of discrimination faced by individuals with disabilities at the hands of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), it is suggested that organisations such as NASCOH and other NGOs be led by persons with disabilities to ensure the implementation of policies that support the employment and advancement of PWDs.



In addition, the government of Zimbabwe must conduct a national survey for PWDs. This will enable the creation of a comprehensive and accurate national database, which will furnish NGOs with the necessary information to successfully implement their empowerment initiatives.

More so, the government must provide adequate educational opportunities to PWDs so that they become assertive in matters that affect them. Without education, it becomes difficult for them to find employment when they grow up. As a result, people with disabilities end up being trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty.

Furthermore, the country's legislation needs to address the issue of expensive aides such as mobility aides, and prosthetics used by PWDs. The government should subsidise the purchase of scarce and expensive aides and appliances. This will help to alleviate the suffering of people with disabilities and enhance independence in their daily lives.

In addition, for PWDs to benefit from national economic policies and NGO programmes, there is need to eliminate the social and attitudinal barriers. It is also important to educate communities about disability-related issues in order to foster a positive change in mindset, which is currently very negative.

Moreover, each of the country's ten provinces must be allocated at least one seat reserved for people with disabilities in parliament.

Additionally, the National Disability Board should be granted the authority to issue adjustment orders to any institution, without the need for ministerial approval. This will increase the accessibility of public premises by persons with disabilities.

Lastly, the catchphrase "nothing about us without us" has been adopted by several disability rights movements. People with disabilities should therefore play a prominent role in implementing disability-inclusive policies. There is need to educate PWDs to fight for their rights and advocate for policies that empower them.

CONCLUSION

Over the last decade there have been promising signs for PWDs as the government of Zimbabwe ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, enacted a new inclusive constitution and launched the National Disability Policy. Regrettably for PWDs, this has not translated to the betterment of their lives.



This study was carried out to reflect on the effectiveness of various programmes that are being provided by NGOs to empower persons with disabilities. It has concluded that there are a lot of programmes that are being implemented by NGOs to empower people with disabilities in Zimbabwe. These programmes include educational programmes, social-economic programmes, health programmes and sports programmes.

The study also concluded that the country's legislation does not adequately protect the rights of people with disabilities. For instance, the Disabled Persons Act of 1992 was enacted to protect and advance the well-being of people with disabilities. However, since the enactment of the Act two decades ago, nothing much has changed in the lives of PWDs.

In conclusion, there was consensus among the interviewed respondents that empowering People with Disabilities can only be achieved if the prevailing social attitudes are addressed. In addition, there is need to involve PWDs in making decisions that affect them. Good policies are normally derived from felt rather than perceived needs. In other words, only a slave can comprehend and interpret the emotions of another slave.

NOTE

1 Government of Zimbabwe (1992) Disabled Persons Act, Chapter 17:01. Harare: Government Printers.

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