National Council of & for Persons with Disabilities

# BACKGROUND/SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS/ISSUES

Since the mid-1950s several efforts have been initiated and pursued by individuals, civic groups, as well as government and non-governmental organizations in an effort to improve the situation and quality of life of Person with Disabilities (PWDs). These initiatives include sponsorship of formal education for selected beneficiaries, the establishment of schools and workshops, the enactment of legislation to facilitate the creation of statutory bodies and institutions, the implementation of several programmes with support from government and the private sector, the construction of physical infrastructure, and the endorsement of universal declarations and international conventions. However, there is growing consensus among stakeholders that the current status of PWDs in the society requires urgent priority attention. Based on the lessons learned from past interventions, it appears that the first order of business in the quest to improve the quality of life of PWDs is the articulation of a comprehensive policy that will guide all future action in their interest.

Several gains have been made for and on behalf of PWDs, but several shortcomings need to be addressed as well. On the one hand, past efforts have resulted in the incorporation of PWDs into the formal education system and the workforce, issues of PWDs have been incorporated into the planning, design and implementation of public and private infrastructure, the number of service providers especially in the field of health has increased since the mid-1950s, and there is a general acceptance of the need to address the needs of PWDs more vigorously. A significant milestone is the appointment of a PWD to serve in the Senate of the Government of Saint Lucia. On the other hand, it is felt that there is too much rhetoric on the situation and plans to address the needs of PWDs and not enough action. This is symptomatic of the absence of a policy that clearly articulates the priorities, resources and the concomitant enabling institutional and other environments. There is still a lot of passing reference to integrating issues of PWDs into the development planning process. Matters affecting PWDs are treated as a matter of last resort and are very peripheral to mainstream development planning and implementation.

Despite the few gains of past efforts and the magnitude of current and emerging issues still to be addressed, there remains a strong lobby and voice for PWDs. An abbreviated historical account of past actions by several stakeholders outlined below provides a reservoir of hope and encouragement for the many who strive assiduously for improvement in the quality of life of PWDs.

* Prior to 1950 there was no organized effort to assist PWDs in Saint Lucia.
* During the mid-1950s, two blind and visually impaired children became the first beneficiaries of formal education for CWDs when the St. Lucia Women’s Association sponsored their attendance at the School for the Blind in Trinidad and Tobago.
* In 1964, the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind (RCSB) succeeded in persuading the Saint Lucia Government to open a school and workshop for the blind under the jurisdiction of the Social Welfare Department in the Ministry of Social Affairs.
* In 1972, the St. Lucia Blind Welfare Association (SLBWA) was constituted as a Statutory Body through an Act of Parliament charged with the responsibility of looking after the interests of the blind and other visually constrained persons (VCPs). The SLBWA is the most active institution promoting the interests of VCPs.
* In 1973, a group of local and foreign volunteers, concerned about the lack of programs for children who are mentally challenged, formed the St. Lucia Association for Retarded Children, later renamed The St Lucia Association for the Developmentally Disabled (SLADD) which currently operates the Dunnotar School which opened its doors in 1975. This institution delivers an education and vocational program designed to meet the educational and social needs of the mentally challenged.
* In 1973, a group of Peace Corps volunteers (PCV), dedicated to assisting children who were deaf and hearing impaired conceived of the idea to provide special education for such children. This initiative was embraced by a group of concerned citizens who launched the St. Lucia Society for the Deaf that same year. The institution is now called the Lady Gordon Opportunity Center for the Hearing Impaired and children with special educational needs.
* By the end of the 1970s, three vibrant and well-meaning institutions had emerged on the institutional landscape: the SLBWA, the Dunnotar School and the School for the Deaf. These three institutions have all made significant strides in pursuit of their mandates through the support of local regional and international voluntary organizations, teachers, parents, and PWDs. International and local agencies and the Government of Saint Lucia have provided personnel and financial support over the years.
* By the end of the 1970s, programs and facilities for the Visually and Hearing Constrained Persons (VHCPs) and the mentally challenged were confined to Castries. There were no facilities or organized program for persons who were physically challenged. In response to the need to address the needs of PWDs in underserved geographic areas, the Government of Saint Lucia established the Special Education Center in Vieux Fort in 1991, followed by the Soufriere Special Education and Rehabilitation Center in 2001.
* Other significant initiatives included the establishment in 1998 of the Child Development and Guidance Center (CDGC), an institution for early detection and intervention. In the year 2000 the Ministry of Education created the post of Special Education Officer in an effort to pay much needed attention to students in especially difficult circumstances and to enhance the further integration of CWDs into the mainstream of the education system.
* When the United Nations declared 1981 to be the “International Year of the Disabled,” with the theme “Full Participation and Equality,” the above-mentioned institutions in Saint Lucia came together to form an organisation of and for Persons with Disabilities. This organization is now known as “The National Council of and for Persons with Disabilities” (NCPD).

In spite of these advancements, however, there are several old, new and emerging issues to be addressed and obstacles to overcome. These issues and obstacles impede or restrict PWDs from exercising the same rights and fulfilling the same responsibilities as any other citizen, thereby inordinately delaying their full integration into the mainstream of our society.

The task of addressing the status of PWDs today abounds with many situations and challenges. The sizeable proportion of PWDs in the population is becoming a cause for concern. The 2010 population Census has revealed that persons with

disabilities account for approximately 12% of the nation’s population. The cause of disability ranges from hereditary/biological to accidents. Vehicular accidents, ‘harm to the person’ crimes, occupational hazards and physical abuse are becoming the major contributors to several forms of disability chief among which is physical disability. It is noteworthy that as the population grows older, many impairments are also related to ageing.

Several implications emerge from these trends in the face of an already resource constrained environment. The demand for treatment and rehabilitation and unencumbered participation in all spheres of life of the society through equal opportunity will increase as more PWDs are empowered with rights and responsibilities. More financial, personnel and other relevant resources will be required to supply the treatment and rehabilitative services, as well as the assistive technologies and other enabling environments for PWDs. Increasing emphasis will have to be placed on prevention thus making an additional call on available financial and other types of resources. Priority setting will have to be informed by robust evidenced-based research in order to enhance the significance of this important dimension of human development and to eliminate the peripheral treatment of disability issues.

The basis for action in moving to improving the lives of PWDs is clear. When the quality of life of PWDs is enhanced, then the life of the members of the community and society as a whole is enhanced. Disability can affect individual at every stage of the human life cycle and it has been said that every human being is endowed with some form of disability; some are just more functional than others, depending on the particular society and on the social construction of the definition of disability. The magnitude of the incidence of disability is still not known. This poses a challenge in creating the policy space for intervention. Therefore there is a need to close the knowledge gaps by undertaking rigorous census of PWDs. The national legislation landscape is deficient in making a claim for the rights and privileges of PWDs in an uncompromising way. The various poverty reduction programmes do not specifically target PWDs and social protection mechanisms are not watertight enough to ensure the safety of the majority of PWDs who are not below the poverty line but they are indeed considered among the vulnerable groups. Many of the interventions at the individual level focus on the rehabilitation response rather than on prevention. At the household level, the management of PWDs is seen as burdensome by some and in some instances PWDs become victims of abuse.

Areas for continued intervention:

PUBLIC AWARENESS

Public awareness is required to promote equality of opportunity for PWDs as well as behavior modification among the society in general.

HEALTH CARE

Adequate healthcare is an essential ingredient . The provision of and access to healthcare services is to allow persons with disabilities to enjoy a better quality of life , to prevent secondary disabilities, and to facilitate rehabilitation so that they can achieve their full potential. The Ministry of Health focusses on Universal Health Care.

EDUCATION & TRAINING

Access to appropriate and quality education is a fundamental human right of every citizen and ample opportunities must be provided to persons with disabilities regardless of function in the least restrictive environment.

TRAINING FOR PROFESSIONAL CAREGIVERS

Training for all professional caregivers in the delivery of services at all levels, and in the planning and implementation of programs and services concerning persons with disabilities.

EQUAL EMPLOYMENT, OPPORTUNITIES & CONDITIONS

All capable persons with disabilities should be afforded the opportunity to participate in the labour market. Increased measures must be implemented to facilitate the productive and gainful employment of persons with disabilities.

ACCESSIBILITY TO THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Inaccessibility to the physical environment is a major constraint to the full participation of persons with disabilities in society. Access to the physical environment is paramount.

The Ministry of Transport & NCPD has embarked on a number of initiatives with regard to road safety for pwds.

INCOME MAINTENANCE AND SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

The availability of a disability grant of EC$200.00 for children with severe disabilities and public assistance allowance for persons with disabilities who qualify.

ADAPTIVE DEVICE AND EQUIPMENT

Improve the quality of life of persons with disabilities through the aid of science and technology.

HOUSING

Suitable low cost housing for persons with disabilities required.

LEGISLATION

Legislation that pertains to the social dimensions of development are silent on measures to ensure persons with disabilities are provided with equal opportunity to participate in an benefit from actions in their interest.

Great pride and enthusiasm have been exhibited in support of the draft National Policy for Persons with Disabilities which has been in the making for the past decade by persons with disabilities and their advocates. Numerous consultations were conducted and went through many stages of approval island wide.

The enactment of the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities and the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities will create greater impetus for the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was endorsed by the Government of St. Lucia on Thursday September 22, 2011 and is awaiting ratification.

FAMILY LIFE AND SUPPORT

Not all families are endowed with the resources to provide support to families with disabilities. In this regard the state along with other significant stakeholders has a responsibility to provide support to families to strengthen and empower them to perform their roles to the best of their ability.

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