

## DISABLING SOCIAL CONDITIONS: PROBLEMS OF DISABLED PEOPLE

In this article, Tessa Bachmayer looks at what causes disabilities, and what problems disabled people experience in their everyday lives. Even though these problems are enormous, there are ways and means for disabled people to deal with these problems in a constructive way. This is what this article hopes to show.

### 'Disability' and 'ability': A matter of social definition

One thing must be made clear from the outset: If we talk about a 'disability' or a 'handicap', we are measuring people with the yardstick of our society. A person who has, for instance, lost one arm or leg, is branded 'disabled' only because it might prevent him from doing a certain type of work that his employer, or society in general, might expect of him. Therefore, the negative word 'disabled' comes to be used only because 'able-bodied' people are taken as a norm.

But this is not a matter of words only. The way in which these words are being used tells a lot about our kind of society, in which 'disabled' means being treated differently to people who can use all their limbs and organs. Most facilities - ranging from toilets, stairs, roads, and public transport, to organisations, local authorities, and often even the families of the 'disabled' people themselves - do not cater for people who cannot use their limbs and organs in the way that other people can. And that is what makes 'disabled' people handicapped. Because of the way in which everything is designed for people who can stand up, walk, climb, reach out, talk, read and write, etc., 'disabled' people have to depend on other people for help to fulfil their needs.

In this way, 'disabilities' and handicaps are the result of the society we live in. 'Disability' is a matter of social classification, and handicaps arise because ev-

everything is designed and built around this classification.

Most public facilities in an urban environment are designed for able-bodied people. Thus, being 'disabled' means more than coming to terms with a particular physical disability. It also means learning to adapt to an environment which often does not cater for such disabilities.

### **Social causes of disabilities**

Among white South Africans, physical disabilities arise mainly from motor accidents and sporting injuries. In the black townships, in contrast, most disabilities stem from violent actions which happen as a result of poor living conditions, overcrowding, low wages, high cost of living, and unemployment. Where the police reacts to people voicing their grievances, they often use rubber bullets, birdshot, and buckshot, all of which can cause injuries which lead to permanent physical disability. In addition, black urban workers, more than any other group, are exposed to industrial hazards and accidents which often cause disabilities.

### **Inadequate treatment and care**

If we trace the process that the disabled person goes through from hospital treatment to re-adjustment to township life, we will find many problems. At the moment, medical and paramedical posts at all hospitals are being frozen; there is a shortage of doctors, physiotherapists, and social workers. This means that the disabled do not get adequate care. There are no special rehabilitation units in black hospitals. Often, there is a shortage of hospital beds. So many patients are discharged before they have had treatment for the period required. Moreover, when the disabled person leaves hospital, there are very few follow-up procedures. In many cases, hospital staff do not do home visits.

The disabled person has to learn to live with his disability - not only physically, but also psychologically. Seldom are patients explained the details of their disability. It is expected that the people concerned should cope with their new situation on their own. Very often, the families of disabled people are unaware of the problems they are facing. Often, also, the families of disabled people do not know how to help them to adjust. Where these disabled people do not find good community support and resources, they often feel unable to ask family and friends to help them.



### **Problems with housing and transport facilities**

Housing conditions in the black townships make life very hard for disabled people. Most houses are small and overcrowded. They are a very dismal environment for

disabled people who cannot move around and are confined to the home. For people who are lucky enough to have wheelchairs, there are problems with narrow doorways and steps leading up to the front or the back door of the house. Another difficulty lies in the fact that toilets are located mostly outside of the houses. All this means that disabled people have to rely on help from other people to fulfil their most basic needs.

Transport is also a big problem for disabled people. To catch a train means having to climb up and down a number of stairs at stations. Buses are high above the ground, and they are usually very crowded. That makes it almost impossible for disabled people to catch a bus. Therefore, the only way for a disabled person to get around is either by taxi or by driving a car which is adjusted to the person's disability. Both of these means of transport are very expensive.

Cripple Care in Soweto has a transport service for people working or going to school in town. But the people concerned must first find transport to Cripple Care, before the Cripple Care transport takes them to town. Clearly, this does not nearly cater for the transport needs of all the disabled people. No other township has got any such facility.

## **Disability grants and UIF**

People who are disabled can get disability grants. Such grants amount to R114 every two months (R57 per month). Disabled people often have to wait for six months, and often up to a year, until the money is first paid out. After the first payment, the disabled person must re-apply every year for his grant to be continued. There are some other grants available. If disabled people were injured at their jobs, they can apply for Workmen's Compensation; if they were injured outside of the workplace, they can apply for sick pay. If they lost their jobs because of their disability, they qualify for UIF (Unemployment Insurance Fund) payment.

However, there are long bureaucratic procedures involved in applying for and getting any one of these grants.

## Organisations

There are some organisations which provide information and limited facilities for disabled people.

Firstly, there is Cripple Care, which mainly provides transport to and from school for the disabled children of Soweto. Cripple Care is a privately subsidised organisation. There are only four social workers employed by Cripple Care in Soweto. Therefore, Cripple Care cannot give all disabled people and their families the help and advice that they need. Cripple Care has also established facilities in Wattville, Daveyton, Germiston, Eldorado Park, and Lenasia.

Another organisation for the disabled is SHAP (Self Help Association for Paraplegics). SHAP is a non-profit making organisation based in Soweto. It was set up to enable the disabled to do something about and with their disability themselves. The difference between SHAP and Cripple Care is that SHAP encourages disabled people to help themselves, rather than making them dependent on organisations. Even though SHAP cannot and should not replace the government's responsibility to provide for adequate care and facilities for the disabled, SHAP aims at getting disabled people out of their isolation and despair. SHAP makes information available to people, and encourages disabled people to take up a job. SHAP itself can offer employment for only 70 disabled people (whereas there are over 600 paraplegics in Soweto alone). The kinds of jobs that SHAP has to offer are mainly handwork jobs, which industry is giving out on a contract basis.

The Orlando Shelter is another place which gives employment to a limited number of disabled people.

For blind people, there is the Transvaal Association for Blind Black Adults (TABBA).

There are two schools specifically for physically disabled children: the Phillip Kushlik School at Baragwanath, and the J.C. Merlin School. However, both these schools provide education only up to Standard five. Also, these schools do not include other disabled people, such as blind, deaf and dumb children. For these, there are no facilities.

## Addresses

Cripple Care Association of Transvaal Postal address:  
Private Bag X1 Parkview 2122, Street address:  
Pallinghurst Road Westcliff

SHAP phone Mal Sadie at 837-2621

Orlando Shelter phone 933-3800

TABBA phone Ms. Mofolo 984-1013 for address

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