

Holistic Approach to Develop a Barrier Free Environment for People With Disabilities (PWDs) in Sri Lanka

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1.0 SUMMARY

Development with Disabled Network (DwDN) is a network of disability and development sector organizations and professionals to facilitate a common platform for mainstreaming disabled people in development process in Sri Lanka. It facilitates expertise sharing, technical backstopping and lobbying/advocacy platforms for the members and other stakeholders to increase the participation of disabled people in the social-economic development of the country. Sharing experiences, capacity building, research and advocacy are the main strategic directions of DwDN. DwDN works at different levels from the grassroots to national level to achieve its overall objective.

In early days “Barrier free environment” was perceived as physical environment that facilitates physical mobility of people. However, DwDN believes it is broader than that and encompasses removing or minimizing the barriers for socio-economic mobility of people. In this definition of “barrier free environment for the persons with disabilities” is concerned, it is a large sector and a single organization or a party cannot lead it alone. Mobility is a key factor for any person in his or her life and in active participation in socioeconomic activities. In this paper, it describes that how DwDN addressed the challenges of “making a barrier free environment” and how it impacted on persons with disabilities in the rural districts of Sri Lanka. DwDN took a holistic approach to make a collective effort to make barrier free environment for PWDs in collaboration with wider spectrum of stakeholders including policy/decision makers, practitioners, designers, volunteer, community leaders and PWDs.

The followed approach by DwDN is a three tier approach which covered three levels viz; national advocacy, networking and capacity creation and demonstrating ground level models. As a national level network, DwDN possess the ability to play a significant role in these three tiers through its members. It has created a common platform to create a policy dialogue among the higher level officials through establishing the national steering committee. DwDN operates with number of organizations those are providing services to PWDs. Making appropriate linkages for PWDs among disability related services, research & development and technology development, etc. their ability to participate in socio-economic activities increases significantly. At the third level, it is demonstrating practical mainstreaming options with most marginalized PWDs in the rural Sri Lanka to uplifting the living condition through demonstrating appropriate

solutions for mainstreaming which encompasses several technological. DwDN has demonstrated viable ground level options and technologies that creates conducive environments for PWDs such as disabled friendly toilets, cost effective housing, mobility equipments etc.

2.0 Objectives OF THE STUDY

Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) have been mostly seen as people that under privilege and need to be taken care of and protected. Initial policies and programs relating to persons with disabilities were based on the approach of institutionalization and passive community care, which encouraged their dependence. Such policies and programmes also resulted in the creation of built environments and systems that are full of barriers hindering persons with disabilities from participating actively in socioeconomic activities.

An accessible/ barrier free environment is one, which allows people to move around safely, independently, and without restriction. Also it creates access to livelihoods, education, employments which basic elements of quality of life. Rough estimates state that 10 % (According to WHO) of Sri Lanka's population is people with disabilities. Creating a barrier free environment not only benefit persons with disabilities but also people who are temporarily disabled due to illness or accidents, the elderly, expectant mothers, and children. In Sri Lanka, PWDs in the rural area has been served least facilities of mobility and access to the services such as health, education, information and public services comparatively urban disabled. There is a huge gap in the process of implementation barrier free access for the disabled in both rural and urban areas, though there many law enforcement, policy developments, parliament acts and planning for protecting rights of persons with disabilities.

The overall objective of this study is to assess the appropriateness and impact of the approach adapted by DwDN to increase mobility of PWDs in the rural areas.

Specific objectives

- To develop a framework for “barrier free environment development”
- Validating the framework with supporting factors and information from different stakeholders
- To examine the three pronged approach of DwDN towards mainstreaming disability
- To identify positive relationships in facilitating linkages between PWDs and related government and non-government service providers
- Access the level of enhancement of socio- economic activities of PWDs through the actions of DwDN
- To discuss the “quality of life” enhancement aspects in relation to mobility of PWDs
- To discuss the experiences of DwDN in making barrier free physical and social environment in Sri Lanka

3.0 MATERIALS AND/OR METHODS

The research has been carried out using qualitative data collection from primary and secondary sources. A literature review has been carried out to understand the concept of “barrier free physical and social environments”. Review of documents available with DwDN and its members were also reviewed to obtain relevant data and information. Semi-structured interviews were also carried out with a cross-section of the stakeholders including PWDs, government officials, member organization staff, other NGO representatives and academics to obtain information and a perception on the impacts of three-pronged approach of DWDN.

The study was carried out as a perception evaluation.

The following framework has been developed and validated through the study

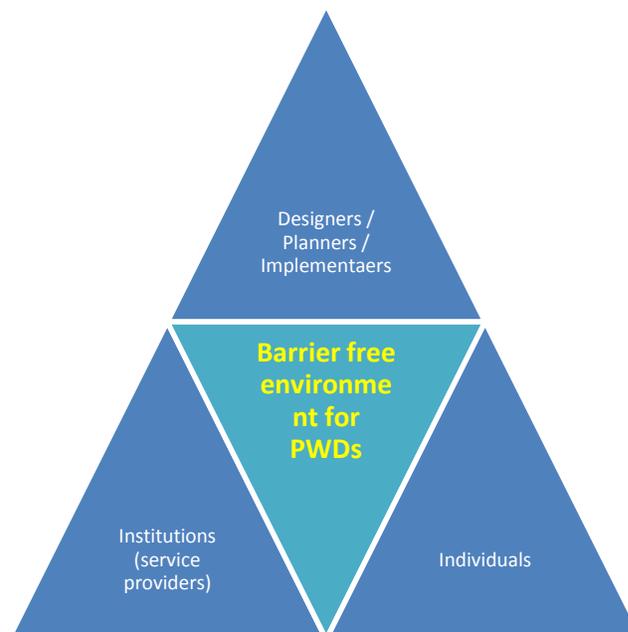




Figure 01: DwDN’s Framework for making a “Barrier free environment” through mainstreaming

Development with Disabled Network (DwDN) is a collective of development sector organizations, disability focused organizations and professionals those work towards disability mainstreaming into the process of development. DwDN make common platform and facilitate for sharing experiences in bridging the gap in between development and disability sector organizations on disability mainstreaming.

Developing a barrier free environment for PWDs is done by DwDN as a collective and collaborative action together with government, semi-government and Non-state actors. The overall objective of these actions was; to enhance access to services and developmental decision making of PWDs in socioeconomic activities. Developing a barrier free environment (physical and socio-economic) for PWDs was the key element of the mainstreaming intervention. The above framework shows the model that has been applied in the process which is mainly working with different stakeholders.

4.0 RESULTS OR EXPECTED RESULTS

The interventions of developing barrier free environment for PWDs was started in 2008, but DwDN has been working in the field of infrastructure development and improving accessibility facilities for PWDs since 2002 with the support of Practical Action. Following it describes success stories that have been accomplished during the last five years.

Table 01: Actions are taken at different levels

Level	Actions	Results / achievements
Level- I Working with national level policy makers, decision makers, planners and implementers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a dialogue among the policy makers, decision makers, and planners on developing transport infrastructure facilities for PWD. • Establish a national working group (steering committee) to work on a barrier free environment for PWDs. • Develop an action plan for short / long term to work. • Developing appropriate models / research on the issues. 	A national level workshop was organized by DwDN with the support of the Lanka Forum for Rural Transport Development, Basic Needs, LC Disability Center and VSO. Key secretaries from Ministry of Transport, Ministry of Social Services, key officials from semi-government institutions related to transport, development agencies were participating in this workshop and it could be sparked the issues of access and mobility of PWDs. As a result of this workshop; a national working group was established under the ministry of Social services.
Level- II Working to institute those providing services for PWDs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving accessibility facilities for PWDs at administration centres, vocational training centres, railway stations. • Developing appropriate models for mobility. • Building capacities of Non-state actors to get involved PWDs into development projects. • Support to improve services for PWDs (vocational training, employment opportunities) • Module development. 	Established accessibility facilities in rural areas to access services (through project implementation in the Eastern province) Accessibility audit in urban areas (improved accessibility facilities in Sri Jayawardanapura Kotte Municipal Council) / building technical capacities of local government in rural areas for accessibility establishments Building capacities on non-state actors in development to get the participation of PWDs in development (livelihood, health, disaster management, employment, education). Established 3 resource groups for

		<p>facilitating disability mainstreaming in different thematic areas (disaster, infrastructure)</p> <p>Developed and translated module of disability mainstreaming and technical guideline for disability friendly infrastructure development.</p>
<p>Level- III Working with the rural / urban community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving accessibility facilities / developing disabled friendly environment for PWDs at household level. • Linking with services such as education, health etc. • Livelihood establishment • Awareness of disabled rights • Developing voluntary service groups for follow-ups 	<p>About 100 PWDs directly benefited from disabled friendly houses, toilets and accessibility facilities through own projects of DwDN.</p> <p>About 106 livelihoods are established for PWDs to economically independent.</p> <p>Developed resource group (technical) for constructing accessibility facilities at village level.</p> <p>Established several voluntary groups (women's groups) for follow-ups / create awareness on disabled rights</p>



Picture 01: Using a disabled friendly motor bike for livelihood



Picture 02: Cost effective toilet construction



Picture 03: Improving accessibility facilities in PWDs family

5. 0 DISCUSSION

- Initially any network depends on the members. It challenges any network to keep close contact with the members and active participation without a benefit.

6. 0 CONCLUSION

- Establishment of partnership among government officials, policy makers, development practitioners, researchers, donor agencies and community is vital in achieving overall objective of making barrier free environments.
- Networking of stakeholders at every level is must to minimize isolated and duplication of works. Dialogues in every level must be in place and lessons, ideas and experience needs to be considered at national level decision making, designing and project development.
- The government, including relevant local authorities responsible for strengthening the legal framework for PWDs, implementation and coordination.
- Disseminating information plays a key role of getting public attention and changing attitudes.
- Improving or developing other facilities like vocational trainings, employment opportunities, education, health services, cultural activities should be in place in parallel to developing mobility (transport, accessibility) facilities for PWDs.
- Lack of understanding, lack of capacities and lack of resources are major obstacles of local authorities, administrative body in regards to providing accessibility facilities to PWDs. Donor agencies (development projects), local authorities need to be considered both capacity building & construction (software and hardware) component of providing accessibility facilities. The government cannot allocate finance along.
- Private sector participation is to be increased. The government can promote uses CSR programs of private companies to establish accessibility facilities at their premises and changing attitudes of the general public.

7.0 REFERENCES

- Project document of “Opening Windows for People with Disabilities” 2009, Development with Disabled Network
- Project document of “Livelihood development for persons with disabilities in Ampara district” 2010, Sightsavers
- Organization profile of Development with Disabled Network 2008