

Paving a way out of poverty for people with intellectual disabilities

Millions of people with intellectual disabilities and their families are inordinately affected by poverty and social and economic exclusion. In March 2010, the ILO–Irish Aid Partnership Programme gathered representatives from several East African countries, Australia and the United Kingdom at a three-day conference in Lusaka, Zambia to explore opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to train and work alongside non-disabled workers in their communities, thereby paving a way out of poverty.

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disabilities

LUSAKA – Jacqueline Minchin works part-time as a clerical assistant in the office of Penglais Comprehensive School in Aberystwyth, Wales. “I love going to work. I wouldn’t miss a day. It makes me feel good that I have different jobs to do and that I do them well,” she says. In addition to work, she volunteers one morning per week at a local playgroup with preschool children.

Jacqueline is also an athlete with Down’s syndrome. Swimming is her main sport. She has been a Special Olympics athlete for the past twenty-three years. Last fall, Jacqueline won Gold, Silver and Bronze medals at the Special Olympics European Swimming Championships in Majorca, Spain, where she represented the British team.

Quincy Mwiya of Livingston, Zambia also has an intellectual disability. He is a council member of Inclusion International, a global federation of family-based organizations advocating for the rights of people with intellectual disabilities and their families. He is also a self-advocate member of Africa Network for Developmental Disability (ANDD) and a member of the Zambia Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities (ZACALD).

Both Jacqueline and Quincy were eager to travel to Lusaka to share their experiences about the important role work plays in their lives and to make sure that the voices of others with intellectual disabilities are being heard, when they spoke to the nearly 80 individuals gathered for the conference. Too often people with intellectual disabilities are “invisible” and their stories are not influencing decisions that affect their lives. “My dream is to see that people with intellectual disabilities are part of the solution to the many problems they face and that no one is left out,” says Quincy.

Through their stories, Jacqueline and Quincy called on others to recognize them first as individuals – as daughters, sons, neighbours, co-workers – and secondly as individuals with interests – sport, dancing, and community activism. They also asked others to recognize that though they may learn in different ways, they can make their own unique contributions to their families and communities. More important is that they want the same as others.

Poverty and exclusion – a global story

There are 130 million people with intellectual disabilities and their families around the world, according to Inclusion International. In Africa, some 10 to 15 million people – from a population of over 800 million – have an intellectual disability. Because of stigma and discrimination, the majority of those affected live in poverty and isolation.

For decades, even in developed countries, efforts to promote inclusion and opportunity in all aspects of community life for people with intellectual disabilities have met many barriers, some quite resistant to change. Globally, more than for any other group including people with other forms of disability, people with intellectual disabilities experience higher unemployment rates and are excluded from education, employment, health care and other general services, and from “belonging” in their communities.

The ILO–Irish Aid Partnership Programme supports disability-specific projects in selected countries of East and Southern Africa. The Project “Promoting the Employability and Employment of People with Disabilities through Effective Legislation” (PEPDEL) examines disability-related training and employment laws and policies, and aims to promote their effective implementation. The Project “Promoting Decent Work for Persons with Disabilities through a Disability Inclusion Service” (INCLUDE) supports the full participation of persons with disabilities in mainstream programmes and services in vocational training, entrepreneurship development, employment, and microfinance.

Families often provide the main support for persons with intellectual disabilities, whether they are adults, children, or adolescents. Care of family members with intellectual disabilities by productive adults means that one or more parents are not able to access paid work or must work fewer hours or give up on job advancement. This contributes to a vicious cycle of poverty and exclusion.

“Support services aimed at development of work skills and employment opportunities catering to this population are far too few in many countries of Africa,” explained Gerry Finnegan, ILO Director and Representative for Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia. “Every day we hear how people with intellectual disabilities or their families are struggling to belong, get needed supports, to find a place in school, or get a job.”

“Getting access to the workplace, in particular, poses a major challenge to people with intellectual disabilities,” said Barbara Murray, ILO Senior Disability Specialist. “We have a long way to go,” she said. “Fear and attitude and misconceptions about people with disabilities among employers and others continue to present barriers to their full participation at all levels of society. It will take many years to undo this mindset.”

The way forward

Slowly, things are changing. There are reasons for this optimism. A new era of opportunity has been ushered in with the entry into force of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) in 2008, which many African countries have ratified or signed with a view toward ratification. Together with the ILO Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons) Convention, 1983 (No. 159) and other international, regional and national initiatives, the tools exist to bring about meaningful improvements in the lives of people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

The CRPD signals a dramatic shift from past practices by including a number of work and employment provisions requiring governments to provide training and employment opportunities for disabled jobseekers alongside non-disabled workers. People with intellectual disabilities are entitled to gain from the provisions of the CRPD, as well as people with other types of disabilities. Yet they are frequently not well placed to benefit from the CRPD’s changed emphasis on inclusion. The three-day conference in Lusaka aimed to change that by bringing together governments, social partners, civil society agencies and international organizations to discuss shared issues – in particular, training for people with intellectual disabilities and preparing them for work.

One particular successful outcome was the **Lusaka Declaration on People with Intellectual Disabilities: Achieving Full Participation in Training and Employment**. The Declaration is a compilation of ideas and suggestions from conference participants and disability advocates to collectively affirm the vision and values for people with intellectual disabilities, while recognizing key challenges and providing recommendations for implementation. The set of recommendations spells out concrete actions to be undertaken by governments, employers and their organizations, trade unions, non-governmental organizations and parents’ groups in the disability field. The Declaration will provide a framework for action in this area in the years to come.

"The exchange of personal experiences, the review of good practice in supporting people with intellectual disabilities in integrated employment settings, and the involvement of non-governmental organizations as well as employer representatives not only helped to encourage and motivate women and men with intellectual disabilities, but also provided opportunities for long-lasting, joint cooperation," says Barbara Murray.

The long-term vision of the ILO–Irish Aid Partnership Programme is to help promote decent work opportunities for people with all forms of disabilities in the open labour market, Murray says. "We know from experience that with appropriate training and jobs suited to their skills, interests and abilities, people with disabilities can make positive contributions to the workplace. Work not only helps to provide them and their families with the means to meet their basic necessities, but also allows them dignity and self-respect."

Success stories

Each of the stories below provides a living example that having a disability does not prevent the individuals concerned from fully participating in their communities. Today, through their hard work and confidence, they are not only standing up for themselves but also serving as role models for other women and men with intellectual disabilities.

"I am an athlete"

Jacqueline Minchin, 33, United Kingdom (Wales)

Jacqueline works part-time as a clerical assistant in a school office. In addition to work, she volunteers one morning per week at a local playgroup with pre-school children. She is also an athlete specializing in swimming. Last fall, Jacqueline won Gold, Silver and Bronze medals at the Special Olympics European Swimming Championships in Majorca, Spain, where she represented the British team.

"I am an advocate"

Quincy Mwiya, 34, Zambia

Quincy is a council member of Inclusion International. In the council, he represents the region called Inclusion Africa and Indian Ocean. Quincy is also a self-advocate member of Africa Network for Developmental Disability (ANDD), and a member of the Zambia Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities (ZACALD).

With help from ZACALD, ANDD, the Norwegian Association for Persons with Disabilities (NFU), Inclusion International and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA), Quincy was able to attend the Ad Hoc Committee Session on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in New York. He was instrumental in that process as a self-advocate, particularly for Africa.

"I am an office worker"

Rajab Bakar Simba, 39, United Republic of Tanzania

Rajab works temporarily at the Zanzibar Association for the People with Developmental Disabilities (ZAPDD) where he is tasked with gardening, cleaning and sometimes photocopying. Rajab has been a member of ZAPDD since 2004. Membership has helped him to learn about his human rights and about life skills – knowledge that he passes along to other persons with disabilities.

Rajab is very interested in having a permanent job that will allow him to earn enough to contribute to his family. Currently, he alternates living with his brothers and sisters, though he would like to get married some day and have a family of his own.