

## UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW – SINGAPORE

### JOINT SUBMISSION OF CAN! (CHALLENGED PEOPLE’S ALLIANCE AND NETWORK) AND DEAF AND HARD-OF-HEARING FEDERATION (DHHF)

#### **A. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

There is no rights-based approach to dealing with the disabled. Singapore is one of the two countries in ASEAN that has not ratified the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD). Children with disabilities are left out of the Compulsory Education Act. CAN! and DHHF notes the government does provide opportunities through Special Needs Schools but it is not a rights-based approach. Though there are provisions for education for all under the Constitution the government need not comply as there are restrictions with the Articles.

Overall the social policies are geared to protecting the disabled with a recent heavier emphasis on prevention through early interventions to increase the capacity of the child, who has been diagnosed. But there is very little that is transformative in terms of the social investment in the disabled community or adjustments that mainstream community has to make for the disabled person. They are exempted from the Compulsory Education Act.<sup>1</sup> Though mainstream or national schools today are constructed to include a special education school on the same campus for opportunities of greater integration, there is still marginalization. Some national schools have also been identified within each cluster of schools to accept children with physical disabilities.

There are no laws against discrimination that can protect disabled people and allow them access to employment to enable independent living. There are no schemes to encourage family life for those whose disabilities are less limiting.

Access to buildings remains a challenge though there have been steady improvements in Singapore. It has not reached the standard of Universal Access and the transportation costs remain a challenge.

#### **B. THE DIFFERENTLY ABLED**

It is always difficult to define disabilities. As such it is a challenge for policy makers and service providers to meet the needs of a group whose numbers are not known, cannot be ascertained or which can be contested.<sup>2</sup> Estimates are that 4% of any population will have some form of disability. This means that in a birth-cohort of 40,000 children a year in Singapore, about 1,600 persons will have some form of disability.<sup>3</sup> Cumulatively, discounting attrition by death, even over a 20-year period there ought to be about 32,000 people with

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1 The Act only applies to children whose capacity is to be enrolled into national schools and not special education schools.

2 <http://www.mcys.gov.sg/enablingmasterplan/MainReport.html>

3 Ibid...In the Ministry of Community Development Youth and Sports’ Enable Masterplan, the figures given were about 1,400 children as diagnosed annually with some form of disability.

disabilities<sup>4</sup> of varying ages with disabilities in Singapore. If we exclude those older than 64 years old, Singapore has a 3% incident rate.<sup>5</sup> This is a large number to sustain and it is important to have comprehensive programmes to enable independent living.

## 2. Early Interventions – Right to Education

Article 16(1)<sup>6</sup> of the Singapore Constitution recognizes people's right to education with restrictions from Article 12(2). The outcome - Compulsory Education Act (CEA) that excludes children with disabilities. UDHR Article 26 emphasizes the full development of all children. If children with disabilities were protected under the CEA then it would be the government's initiative to look for all children of school-going age to ensure that they went to school. Currently it is not known how many children remain at home.

The Singaporean government has in recent years, through the Ministry of Education (MOE) has built 55 completely accessible non-SPED schools to meet the needs of children with physical disabilities.<sup>7</sup> According to the Centre for Enabled Living, one out of eight schools is fitted with full facilities for easy access to pupils with physical disabilities. These schools are equipped with disabled-friendly features and are fully accessible. MOE provides special equipment for children with sensory disabilities in school, and deploys resource teachers and special needs officers in these schools.<sup>8</sup>

CAN! and DHHF is concerned about the need for more resources – in para-therapy services and in well-qualified teachers. In addition many of these teachers are not employees of the Ministry of Education but of the Voluntary Welfare Organizations that run the special schools. These teachers have different wages and career structure from the well-designed career paths for teachers in national schools. VWOs too need to offer competitive rates to attract and retain teachers. It is quite a paradox that teachers in Special schools come under a different scheme for remuneration, career-path as compared to teachers in the mainstream

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4 A person with disabilities (PWD) is one whose prospects of securing, retaining places and advancing in education and training institutions, employment and recreation, as an equal member of the community is substantially reduced as a result of physical, mental, intellectual, development or sensory impairments. A person with disabilities benefits most through early detection, early intervention, specialized training and education. A PWD would also like to be part of the mainstream which means access to places, employment and financial security if he or she is to live as independently as possible. This is a costly investment.

5 Both the definition and incidence rate are from UN ESCAP Report (2009). *Disability at a Glance 2009: A Profile of 36 Countries and Areas in Asia and the Pacific*, United Nations, New York. Universal rates of incidence is 4 per cent of population. But these changes depending on the rate of ageing in the population.

6 16. —(1) Without prejudice to the generality of Article 12, there shall be no discrimination against any citizen of Singapore on the grounds only of religion, race, descent or place of birth; (a) in the administration of any educational institution maintained by a public authority, and, in particular, the admission of pupils or students or the payment of fees; or (b) in providing out of the funds of a public authority financial aid for the maintenance or education of pupils or students in any educational institution (whether or not maintained by a public authority and whether within or outside Singapore).

7 *Submission for the Inclusion of Children with Special Needs in Compulsory Education, Section 2*, JCCEA (Singapore, April 2004)

8 Centre for Enabled Living (Singapore) <http://www.cel.sg/Pagecontents9.aspx> (website accessed 7 Jan 2010)

schools.<sup>9</sup>

Though CAN! And DHHF note that in the last 10 years there have been many improvements there is still the problem of inadequate facilities for the children – there is waitlist of children with disabilities seeking admission to some special education schools that cater to a more holistic development of the child with multiple disabilities. Parents anguish over an average wait of up to four months (previously up to a year), before they know if their child is accepted in a school.

CAN! and DHHF appreciates the government's efforts to focus on early intervention for treatment and rehabilitation. The government has put in place the Early Intervention Programme for Infants and Young Children (EIPIC), offered by social agencies like the Centre for Enabled Living and Asian Women's Welfare Association among others. CAN! and DHHF believes that this service, though, is not accessed fully as cost<sup>10</sup> is an issue and many parents remain ignorant of the programmes and/or who cannot afford to take time off for hospital visits to determine the nature of disability for any intervention to take place early enough.

The 'Enabling Masterplan' by MCYS proposes to invest \$610 million in education for children with disabilities from 2007 to 2011. This funding would be distributed between SPED schools and SPED classes in mainstream schools. However \$610 million funding can work out to be a small investment over the years for children with disabilities.

### 3. Right to Adequate Standard of Living

It remains unknown to-date what proportion of Singapore's disabled has received training or support, or enjoy assisted independent living. Most adults with not-too-severe disabilities could be referred to the government and agencies to facilitate employment opportunities for persons with moderate disabilities. There is also a fund to encourage employers to employ PWDs, with the incentive of receiving a rebate of between \$5,000 and \$100,000 for each person they employ. Yet, the efforts while laudable are still not extensive enough.

In this financial crisis PWDs can be in the category of 'last to hire, first to fire'. It is not known how many have lost their jobs as there is still no central registry. At present there is no publicly available document that shows the present state of employability or rate of employment of PWDs. There is also no register of all PWDs.

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<sup>9</sup> 'Remuneration for Careers in Social Service', National Council of Social Services, [http://www.ncss.org.sg/social\\_service\\_jobs/remuneration.asp](http://www.ncss.org.sg/social_service_jobs/remuneration.asp) (website accessed 18 Dec 2009)

<sup>10</sup> <http://app1.mcys.gov.sg/Portals/0/Summary/pressroom/New%20Initiatives%20to%20Better%20Support%20Persons%20with%20Disabilities.pdf...accessed> 15 Oct 2010. The subsidy cost per child is around \$300 which is not substantive enough and parents need to access other sources of funding.

The MCYS' Enable Masterplan<sup>11</sup> holds much promise in meeting the basic needs of PWDs and facilitating their employment. By 2011 it hopes to set up a national office to handle all matters related to disabilities, provide dedicated panels on education and employment among others. Perhaps PWDs will finally be brought into the mainstream of society with all these efforts. In addition the new Mental Capacity Act that went into effect last year will also help parents of the disabled with severe intellectual impairment to legally appoint custodians ('donees') for their children once they are no longer around to care for their children.

#### 4. Right to Participate

There have been many efforts to provide suitable physical infrastructure for the physically impaired. From September 2006, all new buildings will be required to be more accessible to the disabled. By 2011, all housing estates will be fitted with ramps, grab-bars and lifts stopping on all floors. The \$40 million 'Accessibility Fund,' which the Building Construction Authority aims to use for the upgrading of existing buildings, has already attracted applications from government buildings to hotels.

Furthermore, in 2006, the Ministry of Transport announced bringing in more wheelchair accessible buses this year. Currently there are 780 wheelchair accessible buses with another 63 to follow suit. There are 3,600 buses. By 2020 all buses will be accessible to wheelchairs.<sup>12</sup> Let us just pause for a while to digest this – it will take Singapore altogether 55 years (from 1965, independence year) before we really bring the disabled community into the mainstream where they can use the public transport systems as any able-bodied person. Is this good enough?

There is also the question of cost at the personal level for people with disabilities do not automatically get subsidies. They must apply to receive subsidies for transport. CAN! Has been advocating for concessionary passes as given to students and senior citizens. Transport woes limit their ability to attend training courses, schools, access recreational facilities and be more visible in society. Before the buses are fixed perhaps the pavements too need attention to become flush for wheelchair-friendly. The Building Control Authority (BCA) under the Ministerial Committee on Ageing (MCA) has introduced various measures for seamlessness to prevail in an elderly person's journey. These improvements to the physical environment are being put in place because of the growing number of people over 65, rather than a direct result of enabling disabled persons. Meeting the needs of the people with disabilities has remained on a slow burner in Singapore.

#### 5. Right to Love and Marry

The pragmatic side of Singapore's policies has slowed down the pace at which opportunities have reached the disabled community, especially among the educationally sub-normal group. The notion that people with disabilities, can live independently, have relationships, and live fulfilled lives with some community support, is a discussion still conducted in hushed tones,

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11 July 2009)

12 The Straits Times 24 May 2009 "SBS Looks into lower fares for the Disabled"

even by the VWOs that work in this field. Hence the disabled community's access to family life is not really encouraged by almost anyone, including family members, as the pragmatic has overwritten the needs of the person with disabilities. In other countries like Australia a person with disability can live with community support a couple in a relationship.

The social policies are geared towards preventive work that again does not take a life-course approach for the individual and seems overly-centred on diagnosis of the disability, which undeniably, is an important exercise.

### **C. RECOMMENDATIONS**

CAN! and DHHF asks the government to become a signatory of the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. CAN! and DHHF asks for immediate removal of exemptions to the Compulsory Education Act. It urges the government to be more transparent with information on people with disabilities; to offer concessionary rates for people with disabilities; and to plan a more comprehensive plan to enable the disabled to find jobs and secure their own financial security.