

# **PROBLEMS FACING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN MALAWI: LOOKING AFTER THE DISABLED BEFORE THE COLONIAL DAYS TO DATE**

BY  
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Malawi as a Country is divided into three main regions which the Northern Region, The Central Region and the Southern Region with most of the population. All these regions have their own cultures and norms these cultures determine how the people conduct themselves in various activities of life. When the Europeans came and took over government, they did not interfere with the cultural activities of the country although they thought some of them to be primitive or even evil. We can start with the Northern Region.

In this region, for a man to marry a woman, he is required to give some cattle as dowry or bride price. This dowry depends on the value placed on the woman. If she is a virgin the price goes up and if she is a virgin and educated, it makes life even harder for the suitor and if she is a virgin, educated and beautiful, the amount for the dowry goes sky high. This dowry can start from two cows, five ten or even twenty. And according to their culture, once the woman is married off and the dowry fully paid for, she ceases to be part of her father's family and becomes fully owned by the husband. Because of this, the husband has all the power over her and can do as he wishes without the wife or her parents and relations questioning him. She cannot even walk out of the marriage because if she tries, her parents will send her back. She becomes fully owned by the husband to the extent that even if she dies, she will be buried at the husband's home. And if the husband dies, she cannot leave the husband's home but stay there until death. This is seen as a cruel system by the people from the Southern Region and the Central as they chide the northerners that they sell their women into slavery or that it is some kind of slave trade. They however do not see things that way. For this reason families in the Northern Region are very happy whenever they have baby girls because they know that child born they know that there are more cattle coming. For every boy born then it means a reduction in the family wealth. The more the boys, then the more the problems because if the family does not have cattle, they will have to find cash to pay when the sons are due for marriage with the result that most young men must look for work somewhere in order to find money for dowry.

In these circumstances what can happen to a child born with a disability? If it is a girl, the parents know that it will be hard for them to find a suitor, therefore no cattle. If it is a male child then they think what use will he be to the family? Before the Europeans came with their way of running a country, such children were left unattended until they died. This has nothing to do with culture but the mere fact that there would be nobody willing to look after the child. The children are the property of the husband and his homestead grandmothers from either the husband's side or from the wife's side have no part in the issue. Should for one reason or another the wife die, the parents of the wife will either offer you a sister as a replacement and should you not want that, then you are free to go and marry where ever you want but will not be refunded the dowry or any part thereof. Should the husband die, the woman remains the

property of her husband's village. She maybe offered to another close relative of the husband but she will remain there till death. A disabled child in this case will still be with the mother under the wings of the relatives of the late husband. For this reason therefore, it is next to impossible for a woman to walk out of a marriage no matter how abusive the husband may be. The husband is free to bring in other wives without the wife questioning or being consulted.

Coming to the Central Region there are some areas where the practice is softer because they only give some chickens as dowry and the marriage rules are not as stringent as those of the Northern Region. In the unfortunate event that the husband dies, the wife can go and get married again without the husbands family interfering.

As for the Southern Region, most parts are liberal and men and women are allowed to marry who they want without giving anything as a dowry. They are also free to go and establish a home for themselves anywhere. This way the responsibility of caring for their children disabled or not is theirs. There are however those people who are far down in the lower part of the country. These people border with Mozambique and also use the dowry system but even that is only by giving chickens. These too have to look after their children on their own without recourse to the grandparents.

In the Southern Region therefore, there is parental care of the wife and the children if the husband dies, the wife is free to go and get married again and if it is the wife who dies the husband is free to remarry anywhere he wants. In both cases there are rites that are conducted to free the woman or man and allow her/him to re marry. They can get remarried for as many times they may wish. If ever a child was born with a disability, it was given to the grandmother to look after.

In those days before the Europeans established government in Malawi, there were not many if any disabled children being seen anywhere. Does it mean there were no disabled children? No. They were there but they were hidden away from anybody's sight. On the extreme side, children were being born in the homes of traditional birth attendants and whenever they found that the child they delivered had a disability, they did not allow it to survive. For this reason the number of children with disabilities was not very significant. These were the pre-colonial days. Children with disabilities were not allowed or given a chance of life.

After the Europeans established government in Malawi, hospitals and health centres were established by both Government and Missionaries and expectant mothers were encouraged to give birth in these places. The elimination of disabled children at birth was therefore stopped Children with disabilities were therefore cared for in their homes or by the grandmothers. The children were still locked away in the houses and were not allowed to go out of the house. The problem was the belief that any family that gave birth to a disabled child was being punished for some wrong they committed at one time or another. For fear of being laughed at by neighbors they kept the disabled child secretly and if someone asked how many children are in the family, they would mention a number minus the disabled child. This meant that the child was not being counted as one of the family and was therefore not cared for. The disabled child was left out of any social event or any event for that matter. He therefore lived a life of exclusion and neglect.

Today, Malawi has undergone some changes and people are now enlightened and now know that disability is not inability. They understand that one may be disabled in some way but may be able to do other things far much better than others.

It is said that at least fifteen percent of the world population is disabled in one way or another and that the number is increasing everyday due to birth trauma and urbanization. Malawians are getting disabled due to road accidents that are happening on our roads due to the increased number of vehicles plying the roads and the poor roads infrastructure that make the roads very unsafe to travel. Industrialization has also increased bringing in industrial diseases like tuberculosis and others that come in with inhaling toxic material.

In the past disability was confined to mean a physical bodily impairment especially that caused by polio. But now it is known that it is any condition that limits a person from performing certain functions which any other person can easily do. Now anybody found in this predicament is just labeled a disabled person. How is disability defined now after the colonials took over government of Malawi?

Disability is an impairment that maybe cognitive, physical, mental, intellectual, sensory and in some cases a combination of these. It substantially affects person's life activities and may occur from a person's birth or during his life time. For those who get disabled at birth and grow with the disability, it becomes easier to cope with it. But those who become disabled late in life find it very hard either to accept or even adapt to the new situation of their lives. This is understandable in that it is hard for a person today to be able to run around and tomorrow to be wheelchair bound. To be removed from the role of bread winner to receiver. It is not easy.

With independence in 1964, and with help from overseas partners, the government of Malawi started to look at the disability as a problem that needed to be looked into. The killing of children with disabilities was long gone and people had learned to accept their disabled children as people and started to look after them and let them play with other children where they could.

In 1976, President Kamuzu Banda opened the first sheltered workshop for the disabled in Blantyre the commercial hub of Malawi. During the opening ceremony, he made a remarkable speech in which he said "Nobody wants to be nobody" This was a very important statement which even now carries a very big meaning. Everybody today is striving as much as possible to become someone, President, a cabinet minister, a company chief executive officer etc. And that is what President Banda was hinting at so that the disabled people should be employed and become something else apart from the disabled. This too is why all people including those with disabilities are being encouraged to take education seriously. The Government also established a vocational training centre where people with disabilities are learning various skills that can enable them start a business of their own and earn a living. The Government further established a tie and dye workshop where the disabled were taught how to dye fabrics into different colors and this became a success. Once taught to do the tie and dyeing, they could do it easily in their homes and sell the finished product for money and become self-sustaining members of the community.

Independence politically has been achieved; a sheltered workshop has been established for people with disabilities, is that all. No. People were still having problems of various kinds which needed to be addressed in order to start thinking that we are taking care of their colleagues with disabilities.

Looking at people who are blind. These people are not able to see and therefore need training in most aspects of life. They need mobility training and use of the cane to be able to move from one place to another. The number of resource Centre's for the blind are very few indeed and cannot train everybody who is blind. There are also very few people in Malawi who are trained in the teaching of the blind. It is also hard for them to be integrated into the normal schools very few have managed to get to the University of Malawi and graduated but this is a very insignificant number. The other problem is that even after graduating job placement becomes a very serious challenge as people think that a blind person cannot perform the functions required for any job. For this reason we can therefore not claim to have taken care of the people whose disability is blindness. Some blind people have been trained in farming and been allocated plots to grow cotton tobacco and other cash crops in what have been called resettlement areas. The problem here is supervision as there is need for agriculturist to be giving direction in such cases and yet there are no trained agriculturists for the blind. The other problem is that although they may get a big harvest, markets are some distance away and transport to the markets in the resettlement areas is not easily available. The Government of Malawi has reached an agreement with the Chinese Government to open a market for cotton and a textile industry in Malawi to process the cotton and also produce fabrics. This means that at least a market for the cotton grown by the Malawian Farmers including the blind will now have an easy market as the buyers will collect the cotton from the farms selling points. This will help in the empowerment of the blind farmers.

There are also those with hearing disability. There are those who have total inability to hear and those who have some residual hearing. The ones with some residual hearing can be helped with hearing aids which in Malawi are only available at a Catholic Missionaries called Montfort College for the deaf. This College is in the in the Southern Region of Malawi. The missionaries are the only ones who provide education for these deaf disabled people and to think it is the only school available in the country shows that the problem of the people with hearing impairment has not even started to be addressed. What this means is that such people cannot go to university because the facilities are not there. If we can imagine one centre placed six or seven hundred kilometers away, how do we expect the hearing impaired from the Northern Region, and from the Centre to access services at all. Even those in the Southern Region, Chiradzulu, where the College is situated is still very far for a lot of people. This means that a lot of them cannot get the assistance required. And even the hearing aids, they can be repaired at only this centre, so if someone from may be the Central or the North needs a hearing aids or just its maintenance, they cannot make it due to distance. These people also face the problem of discrimination in work places. For example, in factories it may be important that a person must be able to hear the machines working otherwise they will not know when something has gone wrong. For this reason they get sidelined. It also happens to be the only place where sign language is taught.

Coming to physical disabilities, these come due to loss of function in one limb due to one reason or other paralysis for example etc. People with physical disabilities need medical rehabilitation for a start, then mobility assistive devices, then later vocational training.

In Malawi only one organization called Malawi Against Physical Disabilities provides medical rehabilitation to persons with physical disabilities. This is one that was established in Blantyre in 1979 in order to care for people with physical disabilities caused by polio. It employs medical doctors, physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists and orthopedic technicians. All these make up a team to provide medical rehabilitation to the person with a physical disability. The physical therapist gives physiotherapy treatment to the person in order to try to bring some function to the affected limb, the Occupational therapist trains the person to try to do the things he used to do before the disability so that on completion of the rehabilitation process he may be able to return to work or do the things he used to do. The speech therapist gives speech therapy or speech training to some people who have become disabled and have lost their speech. The orthopedic technician looks at the mobility device needs of the person and takes measurements of any mobility assistive device that may be required so that he can pass them to the workshop for production of the appliance needed. This really is a comprehensive team. The availability of only one Centre in the country has put people with physical disabilities in a bad situation in that many cannot access the rehabilitation services and as a result end up in the streets begging; again nobody wants to be nobody let alone a beggar which is demeaning to anybody.

Job placement is another challenge as most employers do not have faith that a physically challenged person can manage to do tasks that need to be done and even more diligently than anybody else.

To just digress a little, one day, an advertisement appeared in one of the local news papers seeking applications for the post of Chief Executive Officer for a certain charitable organization. I decided to try my luck and put in an application with all my educational qualifications etc. They decided to invite me for an interview perhaps I should have informed them that I was physically disabled and then maybe they would not have wasted their time inviting me for an interview. Any way I was invited and did go for the interview. The minute I stepped into the interview room I knew I would not get the job. There were five people in the room but the way they looked at me and the expression on their faces as I went in with one side partially paralyzed they already made up their minds that I was not suitable. Just to cover their embarrassment they asked me why I Applied for the job and I said I applied because of the advertisement that appeared in the newspapers and because I thought that I qualified according to the requirements they had put in the advert. They also asked me how I intended to be coming to work if at all I was given the job. I said, just like anybody else who comes to work and just like I went for the interview. They asked me if I needed money for transport, I told them that I had come using my own transport and would return using the same transport. I never heard from them again. That is one of the major problems facing people with physical disabilities. The in born feeling is that any person with a disability cannot do the work required.

Coming back to problems facing people with physical disabilities in Malawi, Structural barriers are another inhibiting factor to access to employment for those with physical challenges. Most buildings in Malawi are disability unfriendly and inaccessible to people with physical disabilities. Wheelchairs cannot go in and a person using crutches cannot scale the steps thereby making it impossible for the person to get to the offices where ramps are made at all they are too steep for any use. Still another problem is that in the rural communities people believe that any family that has a disabled child is being punished

for something wrong they did long ago. It is therefore a curse to have a disabled child. With this belief people with physical disabilities are treated badly even by their own family members. Then there is the stupid belief among some Malawians that if you are HIV AIDS positive and you sleep with a physically disabled woman, you will be cured of the AIDS virus. Women with physical disabilities therefore are in danger of being raped and having the HIV AIDS virus transmitted to them.

Malawi has only one rehabilitation Centre for physically disabled people and it mainly takes in people who have recently become disabled due to road accidents, work related accidents, attacks from thugs, gender related violence, strokes induced by high blood pressure, HIV AIDS, and other diseases. All these flock to the centre as they have no other place to go. The result is that cold cases do not have the chance of rehabilitation. Not that they are being segregated, but only that space is very insufficient. We as Malawi Against Physical Disabilities are trying to address this with other partners so that there should be more rehabilitation centres. This is a problem on its own. There are small organizations coming in and providing rehabilitation on a small scale in the outlying townships. This is helping in reducing the impact of the problem of lack of rehabilitation service places.

Yet another problem facing people with physical disabilities is lack of mobility appliances and their cost. A Wheelchair produced in Malawi cost about two thousand Malawi Kwacha which is about two hundred seventy three United States Dollars. Which is too much for an ordinary Malawian especially one with a physical disability. In the past Malawi Against Physical Disabilities was receiving the necessary support from donors, we used to produce them and give them out to those in need freely. This was because Malawi Against Physical Disabilities was getting funding from foreign donors. Following the massive looting of Government Coffers by Government officials the donors stopped funding program in Malawi as a result Malawi Against Physical Disabilities has no funds with which to produce mobility appliances resulting in more suffering from those who were benefitting from the wheelchairs. These items were enabling the people to go to schools, go for business and even attend local political gatherings. That way they were kept occupied and therefore found life meaningful. Still another problem facing people with disabilities is finding a partner and as a result a blind man will marry a blind woman and those with physical disabilities will find another person with a physical disability to marry. This also applies to the hearing impaired. Talking about marriage, a certain physically disabled girl was pregnant and when her time came, she went to the largest hospital in Malawi which is the Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital. On arrival there she was greeted with the question "Even people like you can get pregnant" which I think was rather stupid coming from a so called educated nurse in a referral hospital.

Another problem is that people with disabilities mostly have limited education as a result their scope of advancing in the employment ladder is very limited. This is a very big disadvantage to anybody's life as everyone expects advancement.

It is said that disability is synonymous with poverty. What it means is that most people who have disabilities are mostly poor and indigent. This is not by choice. The reason is that people with disabilities are mostly resident in the rural areas where opportunities are very limited. They therefore do not have the resources with which to empower themselves. This is why some of them resort to begging in the streets. Those born in affluent families and have financial muscle have less problems and even in finding

partners there is no problem because the woman is assured of security in marrying such a person. There are people in this country who are disabled but are rich and have shops, cars etc. They get married without hardships.

Another problem that needs to be addressed is that people with disabilities do not have a voice to be heard. There are many organizations purporting to speak for the disabled but in actual fact they are there for their own gains. These people lobby for finances which they say will go towards helping people with disabilities when in actual fact they are financing themselves and their own projects while the people with disabilities are left as bystanders and have no say in the whole mess. This is why at one time the people with disabilities in one of their conferences used the theme “ Nothing for us without us” just to show those who were benefitting from disabilities that the real people are aware of the situation.

As an example, the organization Malawi Against Physical Disabilities has been operating in the whole country meeting people with physical disabilities and seeing their needs. This was made possible due to the donors who were giving funds for all the operational work. When their agreed period of work expired, the work of going to the communities stopped. This spelt doom for the people with physical disabilities in the communities and their caregivers. Now these people are now suffering because the services they were receiving are no longer there. They are suffering silently in their homes hoping that one day MAP will come back to their assistance one day. Now the question is where are the said organizations that pretend to speak for them? What are they doing in these circumstances? Malawi Against Physical Disabilities as a service provider is not an advocacy organization. Its job is to provide the services. They cannot therefore be expected to provide services and at the same time be lobbying for funds. If the people with physical disabilities had a voice at all, they would not have been facing the problems they are facing now. They could have accosted those in authority to explain why the services of an organization like MAP should stop. But alas, they have no voice. The voices heard most are those of N G Os fighting the government for one reason or another. These are in the Newspapers, on radio and on television.

Malawi Against Physical Disabilities, though not an advocacy organization decided to see how it can help. An appointment with the head of State was arranged and the Head of State received the MAP management at State house where he was informed about the plight of people with physical disabilities in the rural areas. Of course for selfish reasons, some individuals and organizations were not happy with the action taken by Malawi Against Physical Disabilities. But after the Head of state heard the full story, he promised to do something about it. He however said that this would take a bit of time as it would mean changing the status of the organization from non-Government to Government and this would involve the Ministry of Justice. After the change the organization will then become part of Government and it will be possible to provide government funding to it. The fear is that if Malawi Against Physical Disabilities is funded as a non-government organization, then all the other NGOs will be at its doorstep asking for funds. This is understandable and for this reason, the people with physical disabilities have to endure a long wait indefinitely. Map will however not stop fighting until something tangible is done and a lasting solution is put in place.

The problems facing people with disabilities in Malawi are still many. The other one is transport. In Malawi, people use minibuses to go from one place to the other. These minibuses cannot take wheelchairs or tricycles. As a result the buses are not usable by people with disabilities. There are no vehicles in Malawi which have conveyors for wheelchairs as a result people with disabilities in Malawi are left on bus stages waiting for someone who can feel for them and give them a lift with the wheelchair. In fact people with disabilities face the toughest times in that apart from being discriminated against they are left out of most outdoor life and are given names like cripples and such other unpalatable names. The other problem is that that people with disabilities in Malawi do not have a voice to be heard. There are organizations that purport to be speaking for people with disabilities but in actual fact they are there for their own gain. The organizations lobby for finances which are said to be going towards the work of the disabled people when in actual fact the funds are for their own wellbeing. The said beneficiaries are left as bystanders in the whole mess. This is why at one time people with disabilities organized a symposium and as one of their themes they said "Nothing for us without us" This is proof that there are a lot of things being planned for people with disabilities without their involvement. Another problem is that when they are looking for housing, the housing institutions or the house owners sideline them saying how will he pay and what if he fails to pay?

The largest problem facing people with disabilities is stigma. They face discrimination, in education, in health etc. in jobs in marriage and very many other cases

#### WHAT IS BEING DONE TO RESOLVE THESE ISSUES?

As has already been said, people with various types of disabilities face many problems and these problems need to be sorted out.

#### Infrastructural Development

Roads are one of the best things that bring development in any country, bad roads are a barrier to people with physical disabilities. I myself with one side paralyzed, fail to walk on rough surfaces. Even a short distance is very difficult for me, may be it is because I got paralyzed at an advanced age. But the fact remains that good road surfaces remove a lot of barriers for people with disabilities. The Government of Malawi is now busy reconstructing roads. Old roads are being maintained and new ones are being constructed in very many places. This means that those places which were inaccessible to people with disabilities are going to be accessible. The Malawi president on 15<sup>th</sup> March 2018 launched a very ambitious transport plan which is aimed at improving all roads, rail and water transport systems. This will make accessible a lot of things where there were none. These are things like health centers, shops etc. and will therefore make life easier for people with disabilities. The roads will also make it possible for people to get to towns where most of the things needed in life are found as transport will easily be available. These will allow even people with disabilities to access services which were out of reach for them. It is easier to travel on a good surface using a wheelchair or tricycle.

Infrastructural development will bring hospitals close to many people. This will enable caregivers to get treatment for their children where the need arises.



## The Disability Act

In 2012 the Government of Malawi passed the disability act which has sections that enforce some actions to be done in order to secure the safety of people with disabilities. As an example, built into the act is the fact that whenever buildings are being planned, they must be planned with people with disabilities in mind. For example doors must be wide enough to allow access of wheelchairs. There should not be steps but ramps which people on wheelchairs or even those who are blind can manage. Where these are not useful, buildings must have lifts that will enable people with disabilities to get to where they want to go. Coming to civic education which is a very important tool, this should be applied to all classes of society because the ignorance that is there covers everybody. The electronic and print media must be used intensively so that nobody is left out. In the rural areas, the radio is the best mode of giving information to the communities as almost everybody listens to the radio. These messages should be aimed at ensuring that all people in the country are aware of disability issues.

The act also makes it mandatory for employers to create some room for the employment of people with disabilities. This will address the problem of discrimination in selection of prospective employees.

On the educational front, the Government of Malawi is trying to make education accessible to all people including those with disabilities. Educational places of all kinds are being constructed with ramps and steps are being discouraged. This is making it possible for people with disabilities to attend school. These structural changes have been extended to tertiary education. Education is therefore becoming accessible to all people. Even those who are blind Government is bringing braille into the colleges as well.

People with disabilities have been having problems to have their voices heard by the community at large. Now with the Malawi National Association for the Deaf, The Malawi Union for the Blind, The Association for Physically Disabled people in Malawi in place, they all have a platform to make their voices heard. They have access to the highest office in the land and can make appointment to have discussions with the president or cabinet ministers of the country.

Public transportation still has to be looked into.

## Mobility

Wheelchairs are available in commercial places where they are sold at very exorbitant prices. These are wheelchairs that are very decent looking. They are made in Europe and have to be imported into the country. This is why they are very expensive. For those whose interest is mobility. They come to Malawi Against Physical Disabilities to get a wheelchair or tricycle at a reasonable price. In spite of this, there are still very few people who can afford to pay the cost of the wheelchair and as a result they go to Indians who have shops in the town and they seek help from these to pay for individual appliances at times. Unfortunately, the people with physical disabilities abuse this facility and go to several shops seeking the same kind of help. There was one disabled person who was asked by the shopkeepers how

much a wheelchair costs and when he got the price, he was given a cheque for Malawi Against Physical Disabilities to make for him one. He came to me with the cheque saying he wanted cash for the cheque which was cheating, we sent him back. Again at one time one of the local tycoons found a disabled person crawling from one of the outlying townships of Blantyre, he picked him up and brought him to MAP and asked why he was not given a wheelchair. Fortunately we keep records and it was found that he was given one just a few weeks ago. The man was angry with the tycoon saying had I continued crawling, by the time I get into town I always end with five thousand Kwacha because on the way people keep giving me money. Just another example of even people with disabilities needing civic education. It is the duty of Malawi Against Physical Disabilities as an organization to seek for financial assistance from various places in order to enable it to produce and issue the appliances to the needy disabled person. But the donors have helped Malawi Against Physical Disabilities for a very long time and are now tired and have therefore stopped helping. The organization can therefore not produce the items anymore until substantial funding is found. Unfortunately most European made wheelchairs are made of aluminum and are only suitable for urban areas and indoor work and are not suitable for the rural areas where most disabled people are found. These wheelchairs then break down in no time at all and because it is not possible to repair them in the rural areas, they get discarded therefore leaving the disabled person with no means of movement forcing them back into crawling, which is very pathetic. Those wheelchairs made by Malawi Against Physical Disabilities are made of local materials which can be found anywhere. They are therefore easy to maintain as they can be welded anywhere where there is a local welder. The wheels are the normal bicycle wheels which use the normal bicycle tyres and tubes which are easily available in local shops. There are people who have copied the wheelchair making and have tried to commercialize the items, unfortunately wheelchairs are not things that can be made enmasse. They are supposed to be tailor made. Each person needing a wheelchair in Malawi has to be measured and the wheelchair has to be produced according to the specifications. Wheelchairs made anyhow will end up bring down the user and possibly injuring them. Sometimes a wheelchair can be found to be too small for the person or too large. In both cases the wheelchair is not suitable. Pre made wheelchairs are therefore not suitable for Malawian users.

The other problem facing people with disabilities is self-discrimination. This is a problem which possibly they themselves do not see or do not care about. They push themselves into a corner and say "I am disabled". It is not known whether this arises from self-pity or what. I know this for certain because there is in the employ of Malawi Against Physical Disabilities an officer with physical disability, whenever he has a financial problem, he goes to the Asians to beg for financial assistance even when he needs to get a loan from the banks, he uses his disability as a tool and because people still do not understand disability they let him get away with it. I also recall a person who was a habitual criminal. When one day people caught him for the umpteenth time, they amputated his hands and left him with arm only. But using just the arms, he went to steal chickens and he was chased and caught. His excuse was that he was disabled but the judge looked at his previous record and noted that he was a habitual thief even before his disability, he was sent to prison for a very long spell. The feeling that I have a physical disability and must be helped is a bad attitude which only the people who have disabilities need to address. Our officer is not the only one. Some persons with disabilities drive vehicles knowing that they need to pay road tax, insurances etc. and when they are accosted by traffic police due to lack of these, they say they

are disabled and the police should feel compassion for them. This is really a very bad mental perception which may need social psychological treatment. In Malawi Against Physical Disabilities, we have just recruited a social counselor who we hope will be instrumental in getting rid of this mentality. The social counselor is for the person with the disability, one, two his or her spouse, and three the caregivers as well.

Yet another problem that faces people with disabilities is masqueraders. There are people who go and sit on the doorstep of a shop and pretend to be either blind so that he should be given alms or pretending that one arm does not function just to be given money. This has happened several times. You find a person looking very disabled and out of compassion you take some money and give him only to find a few hours later the same person walking physically fit and without disability at all. Now these masqueraders are making it difficult for the real disabled to be helped. To counter this, the government of Malawi has put laws banning giving alms to individuals so that all those needing help can receive assistance in the appropriate manner. What the government of Malawi is saying is that anybody found begging should be arrested and so should those people giving the alms. How workable this law is I don't know. But it is civic education that is very essential to everybody and even companies and organizations.

Improvement of the love for people with disabilities. It has been noted that people with disabilities find it hard to find partners or wives. This is because the women of Malawi have not yet learned that disability is not in ability. There is therefore need to inculcate this fact in all people right from the start. I have personally known people with physical disabilities who were rejected by society rise to become cabinet ministers and the same people who rejected them flocking to them wanting to be friends. One woman was unable to get a boyfriend just because she was physically disabled. When she moved up the ladder and became a cabinet minister, suitors were all over the place until she picked one to marry. The same happened with a man who was wheelchair bound. Any time he approached a woman the women would rebuff him because of his disability. He however worked hard and became head of one of the agencies fighting for disability rights earning a good salary. In no time at all he had a wife.

What is required in the world, Malawi included is that the word disability and its connotations must be changed so that the people affected can breathe different air, and people's perceptions will change too. This can only be made possible if we start from the beginning of education for all people. All must learn that there is no such thing as disability. All people are able no matter what their situation is like. If this can be built into the minds of all people on earth, there will be a change of attitude from everybody.

It must be admitted that the problems faced by people with disabilities cannot be overcome at once and may be not at all but with some of the steps mentioned, it may be a start in the right direction and maybe in future there will not be any disabled people so to say as the word disability will have been erased from the dictionary and therefore from the minds of the people.

Serious action must be taken by governments to create equal educational facilities for everybody disabled or not. Equal employment opportunities must be availed to everybody so that nobody should be left out. This will bring equal empowerment meant and where everyone has equal chances of doing

business and getting rich or becoming very important in a way, people with disabilities will not find it hard to find partners casual or permanent. They will also not find it hard to find friends. Stigmatization of people with disabilities must go for good no matter how difficult it may be but it must be erased from the face of the earth.

Another problem affecting people with disabilities is the dependency syndrome. Because I am disabled, things should be done for me or that I must have special treatment. This I have experience of. Just as an example, one person with physical disabilities was being interviewed for a job with MAP, He was living about seven kilometers away from the office and was coming into town almost every day to do personal things. He was being pushed on a wheelchair. Asked how he would manage to come to work, he said he had no problem with that. He was given a job of a clerical nature where he was dealing with clients records and we made sure that the records should be placed where he could reach them with minimal difficulties. This went on for some time until one day one of the staff houses fell vacant and we asked him if he would want to be housed there. He gladly accepted. The house was one the organization had rented from a private individual. One day the owner said she wanted her house back and there was nothing to be done but to surrender the house. As luck would have it one staff was being sent abroad for training. This man was asked to move to this house which was just one or half a kilometer away. He started to come to work late and even a, absenting himself from work. When asked what his problem was he said the one who was moving him on the wheelchair was demanding salary for the services and he did not have the money to pay him. We told him the amount of money required would be put on top of his salary so that he should be paying the fellow. He only paid him for two months and stopped and started coming to work as and when he wished. He was give a final warning that should he continue with this he would be fired. He then demanded that for him to be coming to work in time transport should be organized for him to work and home every day. As there was no such arrangement at the time of his appointment it was turned down and he continued to absent himself until he had to be fired. He sued the organization for failing to look at his disability. In court, he was asked how he was employed and how he was going to be reporting for work, he said he had said that he would be going to work himself just for the sake of securing the job. Asked how he was going the first months, he said this changed because a fellow disabled person had been housed in a house near the work place while another non-disabled person was housed in the same area. So he wanted the non-disabled person to be moved to another place to create room for him. Why he said, because he was disabled. The court dismissed the case. He was depending on his disability and wanted to make capital out of it.

The same has happened again. A Person with hearing impairment was recruited to work as a cashier receiving money from customers, she swindled money amounting to three million Kwacha and on interview she pretended not to follow the proceedings but yet holds conversations with other women in the place. The money was charged to her account as a loan and it is being slowly deducted from her salary. Because she is disabled she pleaded for mercy as she has two girl children on humanitarian grounds she was not dismissed from work but left to carry the burden of repaying the stolen money. Unfortunately due to her disability she is demanding assistance with food, hospital treatment transport etc. This is coming back to the fact that she is taking advantage of her disability.

The Government of Malawi has included in its growth and development strategy (MGDS) the improvement and enhancement of services for people with disabilities in the country. This is another milestone in the removal of some of the problems that have been facing people with disabilities in this country.

Malawi has also produced four hundred speech interpreters for people with hearing impairments in order to help them to understand things they may not ordinarily comprehend. There has been an acute shortage of interpreters and as a matter of fact, there was only one television station that had an interpreter. This was making it hard for people with hearing impairments to follow what was on the news or what was being passed on to the population concerning them. This on its own represents a big milestone towards addressing some of the problems facing people with disabilities in the country. Of course the problems are very many and still do need to be looked into, by the society, the Government and most of all the people with disabilities themselves.

Another problem is that people with disabilities get sidelined when loans are being disbursed. For example Malawi being an Agricultural economic based country, people depend on farming. The government of Malawi came up with the idea of subsidizing farm inputs like seeds and fertilizers in order to boost up harvest. When this is being done however, people with disabilities are always left out because those giving out the inputs believe that those with disabilities will not produce anything worthwhile and even if it is loans they say the disabled person will not be able to repay the loan.

One other problem facing people with disabilities in Malawi is that there are no social security benefits for people with disabilities in Malawi in this country as are in the developed countries. Due to this short fall, people with disabilities have to live as best as they can. There is no social security insurance in this country therefore leaving people with disabilities to suffer with no hope of relief. In the developed countries, they give a person some income for feeding himself, meeting health bills etc. and even the caregivers are given an incentive payment. This makes life easy for the care givers unlike here in Malawi where caregivers do not get anything at all. This is why many disabled people have no caregivers. Or the caregivers run away from giving free services when they can go and earn an income elsewhere. Perhaps we are not yet developed enough to introduce such schemes but they are important and necessary and should be considered in future plans.

The best solution is to strengthen the disability Act. It was enacted and signed into law but without mechanisms for enforcement. This will leave the people with disabilities to suffer for a very long time indeed with no respite appearing in the horizon soon. It should be made legally enforceable. It is unfortunate that when the Act was being formulated, I pointed this out saying how is this going to be implemented and how will it be enforced but nobody took notice. Today the Disability Act is there but is a useless one for those who were supposed to benefit from it.

THE END 29<sup>th</sup> March 2018.