Disability and the Quest for Bureaucratic Representation in Zimbabwe

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Bureaucratic representation has become more topical, especially in the 21st century with the emphasis placed on a rights based approach to governance. Various previously marginalised groups including women and minority ethnic groups now firmly believe that unless and until they become visible within various decision making structures, it is likely that such decisions might not reflect their aspirations. The slogan “nothing about us without us” is fast gaining visibility among persons with disabilities. This paper therefore seeks to highlight the quest for bureaucratic representation by persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe. Using a narrative enquiry, the study is informed by submissions from five persons with visual impairments, five persons with albinism and two disability workshops attended by the authors. Results revealed that the government does not have any policy on the promotion of persons with disabilities within the national bureaucracy thereby leaving everything to personal discretion. The paper concludes by giving recommendations as to how the government must proceed in meeting the pleas for bureaucratic representation by persons with disabilities.

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INTRODUCTION

As part of their citizenship rights, persons with disabilities need to be represented in all aspects of governance. Such a right has also been embraced by various previously marginalised groups such as women who have in some way managed to make gender representation an anthem in all government, corporate and civic portfolios. This has in some way benefited women immensely as their plight is now better understood. The same has however not happened with persons with disabilities who are still perceived as incapable, incapacitated and whose needs and
aspirations are best known and articulated by the able-bodied bureaucrats. It is the intention of this paper to articulate the central role and function of self-representation in the bureaucracy as an avenue through which the marginalised can gain entry into the mainstream of social life. In doing so, it is worth acknowledging that bureaucratic representation alone is not a panacea to all the problems that come with disability. Rather, it is here contended that bureaucratic representation is likely to improve the lives of such a social group.

The need for representation of marginalised groups in the institutions of government has also been voiced by various individuals and institutions ranging from the academia to civil society organisations and international political agencies such as the United Nations. Acknowledging the need for minority representation in structures of governance, the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (2007) contends that the disadvantaged and marginalised groups in all societies tend to be poorly represented in political structures and decision making bodies and consequently have little control over decisions that affect them.

As the unfolding discussion shall point out, the status of persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe’s bureaucratic structures is extremely negligible. Apparently, there are virtually no persons with disabilities at the very apex of the administrative machinery such as judges and permanent secretaries. Scholars like Chataika (2007) place the blame on culture and tradition wherein disability represented a detestable state of being. Chataika argues that disabled persons have been viewed as second class citizens even since the pre-colonial era (Chataika, 2007). To this effect, the Shona and Ndebele words chirema and isilima respectively represent incapacity, worthlessness and inability (Chataika, 2007). For Addlakha (2012), disability involves considerable social investment in care work to enable the survival of persons regarded as biologically unfit and economically unproductive. Disabled persons carry the taint of partial personhood casting them with a die of weakness, incapacity, incompetence, passivity, dependence and socioeconomic futility (Addlakha, 2012:2).

As a result of these perceptions and attitudes about disability, persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe have been portrayed as deficient in critical social role functions. This role marginality seems to squarely account for the peripheral role played or occupied by persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe’s bureaucracy and other positions of political, economic and other spheres of Zimbabwean governance (Mtetwa, 2012).
The central argument carried by this paper is that in order to achieve full participation and representation of persons with disabilities at all levels, the establishment of mechanisms to promote their presence and prominence in public office is of central importance. In other words, to fully achieve representation in political life, there must be disability representation and participation across a full range of decision-making levels. Disability representation should therefore filter through the legislature, executive and judiciary.

This quest for bureaucratic representation stems from the general tendency for bureaucrats to “formulate policy as they implement it” (see Lipsky, 1980; Hill and Hupe, 2002; Hughes, 2003; Sabatier, 2003 for a discussion of the role of bureaucrats in the formulation and implementation of public policy). The argument proffered by these scholars is that ideally, the operations of a bureaucracy are organised to provide fair and equal treatment to those seeking assistance and resources. However, as field workers, bureaucrats tend to come across deficiencies and distortions that the bureaucratic system has created through the years (Hill and Hupe, 2002), and work under countless pressures and constraints. The stereotypes they create are very significant regarding the interaction between them and their clients (Lipsky, 1980).

**BUREAUCRATIC DISCRETION AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR DISABILITY REPRESENTATION**

It is here argued that no-matter how inclusive policies any government might make, such policies are not likely to achieve the intended goals unless the beneficiaries for which they are made actively participate in their implementation.

The importance of having persons with disabilities within the national bureaucracy is to ensure the just execution of the policies. Bureaucratic discretion has therefore come to constitute the rallying point around which all previously marginalised social groups strive within their diverse backgrounds to be part and parcel of the administrative machinery.

Such a bureaucratic leverage is more likely to result in some losers or casualties. The unfortunate losers are usually those who, due to one form of stigma or another are not socially desirable, appear to be risky and economically inactive; hence, deserving nothing short of charity (Mtetwa, 2011). This state of affairs is likely to perpetuate their dependence on the family, community and the state thereby forestalling their potential
for economic liberation (for a comprehensive analysis of the politics of representation, see Pitkin, 1967; Philips, 1995; O’brien, 2012).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The need for bureaucratic representation is largely influenced by the work of Michael Lipsky. With his theory of street level bureaucracy, Lipsky’s observations have persuaded many, especially vulnerable and marginalised groups such as women in a patriarchal society, minority ethnic groups as well as persons with disabilities to believe that unless and until they are represented in the government machinery, their hopes and aspirations of getting quality services are bound to fail. This paper understands bureaucratic discretion the same way as understood by Rourke (1984). “Bureaucratic discretion refers to the ability of an administrator to choose among alternatives and to decide how the policies of government should be implemented in specific instances” (Rourke, 1984: 36). The need for bureaucratic representation comes from what Lipsky (1980) refers to as the tendency for street level bureaucrats to alter policies as they implement them. The same bureaucratic behaviour could be attributed to what scholars like Sabatier (2007) call as the principal agent model. Central to this model is the belief that there is an interest conflict between a principal who wants to elicit a certain behaviour, and the agents who may not perform all the work the principal would like. No matter how principals might try to control the behaviour of the agents, they are likely to be constrained in doing so because of information asymmetry. “Principals often lack the information which is necessary for controlling the behaviour of bureaucratic agents, and it is often possible for them to hide such information” (Winter, 2003: 5).

Lipsky emphasises that actors who work in these bureaucracies have a role to play; they are not merely cogs in an automatic transfer of policy-making to outcome in practice. Due to constraints on their time, and bureaucratic procedures at the local level, Lipsky argues that field-level workers may exercise considerable flexibility in implementing instructions.

Echoing the same sentiment, Krause (1999) confirms that administrative agencies enjoy some degree of discretion over policy-making via implementation through agency enforcement and rulemaking activities (Krause, 1999:40). According to Hughes (2003), policies are made as they are implemented. In other words, workers develop routines primarily in response to ‘occupational and personal biases, including the prejudices that blatantly and subtly permeate the society’ (also see Lipsky, 1980: 28).
They develop their own rules about how to treat ‘an X’ or ‘a Y’. So in some ways this reformulation of policy is presented as inevitable and uncontrollable.

In disability studies, there is much talk of the social model of disability. The model views attitudes, institutional barriers as well as environmental structures as “agents of disablement” bent on transforming various impairments into disabilities. The discretionary nature of the national bureaucrats when it comes to policy implementation, combined with the culturally engrained negative attitudes towards disability is likely to keep such a social group at bay within the national policy formulation and the implementation process.

METHODOLOGY

This paper relied on a qualitative methodology wherein the experiences, feelings and perceptions of participants with albinism and visual impairments were solicited. To be more specific, a narrative enquiry approach was utilised to elicit the feelings and perceptions of participants regarding their inclusion and/or participation in Zimbabwe’s national bureaucratic structures and the impact this has on their general welfare and citizenship rights and obligations. According to Chataika (2007), narrative enquiry is the process of research that allows the concerned participants to tell their own story in their own ways. The data in narrative enquiry is usually presented in the form of stories and narratives and therefore are a reflection of the lived realities of participants (also see Munsaka, 2012).

In keeping with the dictates of interpretivist philosophy, persons with disabilities remain the most dependable experts about their own experiences. As such, data can be generated by allowing them to describe their life experiences. On the same note, Morris (1991) asserts that disability research should include the subjective realities of individual disabled people. Using the narrative enquiry, the study interviewed ten participants, five of whom were persons with albinism while the other five had visual impairments. In addition, the study relied on data from two workshops on disability organised by the Disabled Persons Organisations. These workshops featured top government officials who were asked to give the government’s policy position on the need for persons with disabilities to fully participate in the political and economic life of Zimbabwe. In all cases confidentiality was maintained and pseudonyms have been used to refer to participants including the top government officials.
The reader should however remain alert to the fact that no social enquiry is devoid of weaknesses and limitations. As such, the current study should not be taken as representing the totality of experiences of all persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe. For instance, the very fact that two disability categories, namely, visual impairment and albinism were interviewed, leaves out the experiences of other disability categories. However, the two disability types were chosen purely because of their potential to fully and actively participate in the national development processes. This is so given that their impairments mostly require a change of attitude on the part of the “mainstream”.

**FINDINGS**

**The Role of Bureaucrats in Policy Formulation**

As a point of departure, the study sought to gauge the participants’ understanding of the role of bureaucrats when it comes to policy making and implementation. This process is hereafter referred to as service provision.

Recognising the central role played by bureaucrats in policy formulation through implementation, Edson singles out the permanent secretary as the most influential figure in any ministry. To emphasise his point, Edson contended that “I am reminded of the former permanent secretary in the Ministry of Education sometime back in the 80s. That secretary would actually tell you that I am the CEO, the Minister is a political figure. The Minister may tell you what he wants to do for you at a rally but then as long as I do not agree nothing will happen”. Edson gave an example of this other Minister who visited one district and promised a certain school some building materials. On the strength of such a ministerial promise, the school authorities began soliciting for some quotations and presented them to the permanent secretary who in turn dismissed the whole process saying that he had no such plans nor funds within the Ministry. “This is where the problem is, if one is to look at what’s going on today, Ministers often speak of what they intend to do for the general public but many a times, these remain mere empty speeches bent on scoring political mileage than realistic and achievable promises. The permanent secretary holds the keys to any government financial commitment and without his input, political promises remain a vanity” said Edson.
The author had the opportunity to attend two workshops where senior government officials spoke on government policies regarding the participation of persons with disabilities in the national bureaucracy. In line with the narrative enquiry method, the presentation from the senior government official was captured verbatim and is presented in Box 1.

**Box 1: Bureaucratic Representation in the Education Sector**

I would like to encourage more persons with disabilities to take up teaching as a profession because this provides positive role models for our learners with disabilities. It also promotes them fight attitude change within society. In fact we subscribe to a principle of bureaucratic representation.

We have talked about issues of political representation where we emphasised the need for more senators as well as other members of parliament specifically representing people with disabilities. We however need to deal with the issue of bureaucratic representation so that our bureaucracy and our civil services reflect the same diversity that is represented in our wider society.

So if we are saying 10 percent of our people are people who live with disabilities of various kinds the same representation should be reflected in a civil service of a country so that there is empathy. In addition, we need to ensure that there is adequate representation at the level of technocracy as well as at the level of bureaucracy. So we need to push for bureaucratic representation for bureaucratic democracy ladies and gentlemen. Our nation will be doomed if we do not embrace an inclusive approach to development. The issue of equity and inclusiveness is a central tenet in our new constitution. However, it is not only the constitutional obligation that should force us to act on issues of inclusiveness. Inclusiveness in my opinion is a strategic and pragmatic choice that we should make as a country. It is a matter of full and vast national choice of development.

I therefore cannot imagine a situation where we as a nation ignore 10 percent of our population in the national development and policy discourse.

Companies and indeed nations that embrace inclusiveness tend to be better off in terms of harnessing the full potential of their citizens. As an example, the inclusion of women in top and influential positions on national commissions and committees within both the private and public sectors brings with it new values especially values of empathy motherhood and nurturing spirit which previously were lost to these organisations. It is for the same reason that I suggest that the inclusion of people with disabilities in all organisations at all levels will lead to an enrichment of those organisations in terms of values such as better focus, commitment to excellence, efficiency and commitment to effectiveness. It is therefore not an act of charity to include people with disabilities. It is really a strategic and pragmatic organisational move towards an inclusive and sustainable national development trajectory.
Emphasising the importance of representation as a prerequisite for a sustainable and viable national development strategy, the senior government minister even gave the analogy of the drive towards gender parity in all national institutions in both the public and private sectors.

In spite of the above presentation from the government minister, policy discord on the part of government emerged at yet another workshop that invited a different minister to respond to submissions from persons with disabilities on a variety of issues concerning his Ministry.

At yet another workshop conducted by one of the umbrella organisations for persons with disabilities, one minister said “I do not understand what difference your presence will make at the echelons of power. How many persons with disabilities have since passed through our education system since independence? How do you want to be included? How many teachers with disabilities are employed by government? The problem with some of you is that you do not understand how dangerous and difficult it is for a disabled person to be promoted and perform novel and intricate duties not commensurate with his capacities. Even the department to which he is assigned is likely to face some challenges. His own work and life will be challenging too. You must just be thankful for what government has managed to do for you”.

Registering his claim for political representation at various levels of government, Edward suggested that every government department must have at least one person representing persons with disability. His plea stems from the belief that, persons with disabilities, and those with albinism in particular are excluded in participating in both civic and political activities due to false perceptions and discrimination by those involved in the governance of these organisations.

To emphasise his point, Edward called for the full implementation of some of the provisions in the new constitution especially those related to employment, equal opportunities and education. He further suggested that the government must endeavour to harmonise all statutes and policies that are not in line with the new constitution. On the same note, Matthew suggested that government and non-governmental institutions should involve people with albinism in all political and economic empowerment processes.

Echoing the same sentiment, another participant Tinashe feels that persons with disabilities are deliberately shut out of the critical institutions governing policy formulation and implementation in the country simply
on account of their perceived uselessness. Tinashe viewed empowerment of persons with disabilities as one of the measures necessary to secure a niche in national governance.

“Since we are a marginalised group I think there must be affirmative action when it comes to accessing such economic empowerment benefits as the national youth fund. Such affirmative action is likely to contribute a lot towards the economic emancipation of persons with disabilities. It is the feeling of all participants that the national Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment Programme, though it has a disability representation at its national board level is not helpful because it does not adopt affirmative action when it comes to the processing of fund application”.

Participants bemoan the absence of a disabled bureaucrat representative at the level where proposals or applications for the youth fund are finally adjudicated. In the absence of a representative with a disability at the service delivery point, bureaucratic discretion is likely to tilt the fortunes of such a social group away from achieving the goals of the empowerment fund. “We are saying when we have a representative there, it will then be possible for us to advance any issue affecting our membership. It might be a complaint or a proposal” said Trynos (participant). On the same note, Edward saw lack of representation especially within the structures of the government as the chief cause of poverty and unemployment characteristic of the lives of persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe. In that regard, he observed that in spite of the existence of glaring examples of tax reduction policies for firms that employ persons with disabilities the world over, the Government of Zimbabwe has not bothered to enact such policies.

Adding her voice to the bureaucratic representation debate, Sheilla even felt that the way to go is to have a ministry specifically meant for persons with disabilities. “We need a ministry for persons with disabilities that would better handle our issues. I therefore feel that there should be a policy mandating disability representation right across all institutions of government. Disability should not have a representative only at the top. Rather, persons with disabilities deserve representation at every service delivery terminal, a disability desk is required if ever such a social group is to be assured of quality service delivery from government officials. Otherwise, the current scenario is designed such that you get to an officer who does not know disability at all and you do not even get the required services”.

In concurrence with the above sentiments, John closed his discussion by asserting that there is need for people with albinism to craft ways of fitting themselves in all political and bureaucratic institutions. Persons
with disabilities should put up a collective effort and dare to challenge state institutions so that they mainstream disability at every level of the hierarchy. John strongly felt that the only way persons with disabilities can win bureaucratic representation is to try and get political positions of influence in various political formations in the country. “We sometimes attend political meetings, but I feel that they do not help us that much, because whatever message will be spread has got nothing to do with disability. Whether or not they are policies or programmes on disability, the type of politicians that we have are able-bodied and sometimes they do not even bother to articulate them thinking that such policies are not important to the crowds. There is therefore need for political parties to infuse at all levels persons with disabilities”.

**Merits of Bureaucratic Representation**

Asked whether they envisage any benefits from having persons with disabilities assuming influential positions in the national bureaucratic structures of government and other powerful institutions, all participants were of the opinion that much could be realised from such an arrangement.

“If persons with disabilities are given senior posts in the civil service, they are likely to promote the needs and aspirations of their counterparts when it comes to the formulation and implementation of national policies and programs”, said Mathew. In addition this scenario is likely to discourage the discrimination of persons with disabilities when it comes to their participation in the national policies and programmes. More so, having a senior bureaucrat with a disability, such as a permanent secretary is likely to instill a sense of hope to the younger generation, that, persons with disabilities have the capacity to assume leadership roles in society. This is likely to shape the perception of persons with disabilities as useful members of society.

Such an understanding was also shared by Lauraine. On this note, Lauraine contended that the issue of having role models is extremely important if persons with disabilities are to rise to the occasion and ward off discrimination. She gave an example of most children with albinism aspiring to become teachers and nurses only.

In full concurrence, Jenifer indicated that placing persons with albinism at strategic positions in society helps boost confidence in others and provides them with role models. “I think that if there is a person with albinism within the ministry of education, it would be easy for the examination body to understand that such a social group needs special
treatment during the examination. Such special considerations include extra time and a question paper with a bigger font, because as persons with albinism, we do have short sight. Such challenges can only be understood by people experiencing the same situation. Failure to recognise the special needs of persons with albinism during examinations has resulted in many such people being disadvantaged and failing to harness their academic potential”. Jenifer stated that low academic achievements among children with albinism stemmed from the way examinations were conducted. Policies need to be put in place for such children regarding the conditions operating in most rural and urban schools as children with albinism cannot withstand excessive heat and sunlight. Albino children should be provided with adequate protective clothing. “Even when it comes to school uniforms, none in this country has ever raised the issue that children with albinism need protective clothing including appropriate school uniforms. In effect, this simply shows a lack of voice for such a social group in the policy making arena”.

**DISCUSSION**

From the above narratives and discussions, the issue of bureaucratic representation as an important precursor to national development is emphasised. Moved by the principal/agent interface, as well as the implications that this is likely to have given the stigma disability carries, all participants interviewed expressed the sentiment that persons with disabilities are likely to get nothing from most government policies unless they are represented in the formulation and implementation structures. Administrative agencies typically serve as the last line of defence in policy administration within a governmental system. This is because politicians are in a position to shirk responsibility for problems that may arise during policy implementation (Krause, 1999: 43).

The examples given by the participants suggest that besides perceived impairments, social and administrative structures also disadvantage them. Such a viewpoint vindicates the argument advanced by the proponents of the social model of disability. The social model of disability expounds that the social and economic disadvantage endured by persons with disabilities are not linked to their physical limitations, but to the perceptions, attitudes and practices of mainstream society.

Although there is consensus about the need for political and bureaucratic representation from all participants, there are inherent contradictions: First, the lack of a coherent policy on affirmative action for persons with
disabilities on the part of the government. This view is shared by Connelly (2002: 7) who posits that policy is sometimes driven by the goals of the actors who are motivated by their values and interests and informed by their understanding of the world.

Second, it could be deduced from these differing opinions that personal attitudes and perceptions on disability tend to guide the behaviour of those in positions of authority, in the absence of a comprehensive national policy framework. Unfortunately, such discretionary tendencies have tended to characterise policy formulation and implementation in Zimbabwe. To this effect, persons with disabilities during interviews have poignantly cited these inconsistencies as stumbling blocks towards their economic empowerment. Arguably, these attitudes become a function of culture and social background or upbringing.

Last but not the least, such discrepancies could as well be traced back to the academic backgrounds of the government officials. Further enquiries revealed that one government official had a background in media, communication and information technology whereas the other was a scholar in public policy. Although this analysis can never be conclusive in the absence of an exhaustive search for the relationship between a person’s academic or professional background and the tendency to be exclusionary in character, anecdotal evidence as reflected in this presentation seems to point towards the tendency to exclude those lacking a theoretical appreciation of the dangers posed by bureaucratic discretion.

To this effect, a closer look at policies, such as the Zimbabwe National Policy for the Indigenisation of the Economy and the Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment Act, would suggest that the government’s viewpoint is that disability is less of an economic and political issue than it is a philanthropic one. Following from this mind set, the subsequent policies espousing the national indigenisation and economic empowerment agenda such as the Zimbabwe Government Policy Framework for Indigenisation of the Economy (1998), the Short-term Emergency Recovery Plan (2009), the Medium Term Plan (2011) as well as the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-economic Transformation (2013) would mirror the dearth of inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities.

**CONCLUSION**

From the above narratives and discussions, the issue of bureaucratic representation as an important precursor to national development is emphasised. Not only that, but there seems to be an acknowledgement on
the part of both persons with disabilities and the government representatives that the situation must change for the better.

Despite the stiff resistance from politicians and members of the mainstream civil society organisations to offer equal opportunities and fair representation to persons with disabilities, there is consensus among all participants and disabled persons organisations that political representation and participation in public life remains the panacea to poverty reduction.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

On the basis of the above discussion, the paper ends with the following recommendations:

1. As is currently the case with women, the government of Zimbabwe is urged to ensure that an elaborate statutory and policy framework is put in place that would place a mandate on all statutory bodies, institutions and government departments to employ persons with disabilities and to exercise affirmative action when it comes to their elevation up the bureaucratic hierarchy.

2. That political formations be encouraged to treat disability the same way they treat gender issues when it comes to the allocation of posts within their ranks.

**REFERENCES**


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