[OPINION PIECE]

The cost of work: The dilemma faced by persons with intellectual disabilities in protective workshops in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Persons with Intellectual Disabilities (PWID) in South Africa continue to struggle to build dignified and autonomous lives, due to various personal and contextual constraints. More specifically, the transition from school to competitive employment within the open labour market remains riddled with challenges, despite the known personal, collective and societal benefits disability inclusion within the workplace holds for PWID and their families, for communities and society at large. The disability grant (DG) is a form of social assistance, intended to provide income replacement and basic needs support for people who are unable to work, due to disability. Persons with disabilities who manage to obtain 'employment' within protective workshops (PW) are, at times, required to forfeit a portion of their grant, as they receive a 'salary', which often falls below minimum wage. This situation creates a conundrum for the PWID who, despite being 'employed', earns less than minimum wage, and remains largely excluded from competitive employment. In this paper, we discuss the contextual arrangements that create and sustain this situation within protective workshops, noting points of contention, and offering recommendations to mitigate these. Our discussion supports that PWs are both ideally placed and positioned to facilitate the process of integration of PWID into the open labour market, through implementation of a supported employment approach.

Implications for Practice

Protective workshops should consider integrating the supported employment (SE) model to better support PWID. Additionally, an integrated community-based participatory approach to address service gaps, facilitate social action, and strengthen intersectoral collaboration, has the potential to improve the PW model and stabilize the social security of PWID.

INTRODUCTION

The disability grant: A much-needed social assistance initiative in South Africa.

PWID in South Africa face various multi-dimensional challenges that result in continued exclusion from competitive employment. These challenges range from the personal to the social, and expose the complex relationship between functional limitations, and disabling environments. In South Africa, intellectual disability (ID) remains under-researched, and poorly serviced within health, education, social development, and labour sectors[1]. As a result, PWID remain a largely under-served and neglected population, denied participation in meaningful occupations, such as school and work, which promote social inclusion, improve quality of life, and offer opportunity to make a valued contribution to society.

Disability unemployment in South Africa is measured at over 80%[2], suggesting that multidimensional poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, and poor policy implementation, remain significant barriers to the full integration of people with PWD into the open labour market[3]. The disability grant (DG) is a form of social assistance offered to PWD, with the intention to provide relief from the income and productivity challenges PWDs remain disproportionately subjected to[4]. When considered within South Africa's economic, and social justice challenges,

namely, job-scarcity, chronic unemployment, poverty, and disability exclusion, both competitive employment, and social assistance become imperative for PWD. Furthermore, the challenges outlined are especially constraining when considering how they might be compounded by intersections of race, gender, socio-economic status, and disability type. For example, PWID who are Black, identify as women, and reside in townships, remote and/or rural areas, are disproportionately subjected to further debilitating constraints, such as poor access to amenities and transport, a lack of service-delivery, various forms of violence, and limited opportunities for education, and dignified employment.

The DG, although intended to provide social assistance for those who are unable to work due to disability[5], has, become 'caught up' within the barriers PWID in protective workshops (PW) face in securing competitive employment. PW in South Africa are described as "a safe and disability friendly environment with opportunities for people with disabilities from the local community to develop and improve their skills and to earn an income through the products that they make"[6:1]. Tensions lie with the low financial value of the DG, the barriers PWID face when attempting to access the DG, and the perpetuation of disability exclusion, through separate or 'segregated' work environments offered within PWs. These tensions expose the impact of policy misalignment, that if ignored, may continue to 'cost' the PWID through constrained economic and social development, and a high likelihood of remaining 'stagnant' within protective workshops[7].

Struggles accessing the disability grant

Despite the national legislative framework such as the Social assistance Act (13), of 2004 which advocates for PWDs access to the DG as a form of social assistance[7], PWID face challenges accessing this support. This is due to a complex interplay between personal, systemic, and attitudinal barriers, that result in poor communication, and limited information regarding the application and assessment process. For PWID in South Africa, challenges accessing a DG include a lack of information regarding the services available to them and their families, due to poor communication about available services, a lack of safety in their communities, due to disruptive family and home/community conditions, and a lack of trust that the services offered would be able to help them affect meaningful change in their lives and circumstances[8]. Further barriers to successfully accessing the DG include personal and familial difficulties understanding intellectual disability and accepting a disabled identity, combined with disability stigma[9,10].

Protective workshops, however, potentially bridge the communication gap through providing information to the PWID and their family about the process of applying for a DG[8]. Even so, a potential conflict arises between the intention of the DG and the objectives of the PW. More specifically, the DG is intended to assist those who are unable to work due to disability, whereas a key objective of PWs is to provide opportunities for PWD to participate in 'work', as a key occupational performance area. This 'work', although providing the PWID with an opportunity to learn and upskill oneself, while receiving a DG, rarely results in the transition to competitive employment due to the competitive nature of the open labour market (OLM). Waxman[11] highlights that PWID are more marginalized due to the assumption that their support needs cannot be adequately met by the OLM, compared to other disability categories such as physical or sensory disabilities. This limits PWIDs income potential and maintains their exclusion from mainstream work environments. If, however, they are successful in obtaining competitive employment, this is often contractual or short-term, and may have implications for their DG eligibility. What this means is that PWID forfeit their disability grant access when their income exceeds the means test threshold and they are no longer meet the DG criteria[12]. PWID and their families are, therefore, not incentivised to seek competitive employment, despite the economic, and social development opportunities this potentially provides.

The disability grant's low financial value and income limits

As of October 2024, the DG amount was R2 190 per month[5], this is less than half of the minimum wage recommended for a person employed at 40 hours a week, with a monthly salary of R4 412.80, and is therefore deemed wholly insufficient. Firstly, PWD often experience higher expenses as compared to non-disabled persons, especially linked to health care, education and disability support needs[13]. In addition, parents/caregivers/guardians of PWID report limited capacity to find employment and contribute to the expenses in the household[8]. Lastly, PWID who claim the DG, are, due to job-scarcity, poverty, and inequality, often further burdened by being the main or only breadwinner within their households, resulting in the DG being used for their family's household and general living expenses. The DG in these situations, becomes a critical income source within the disabled person's home, used for basic needs, and doing very little to improve the PWIDs inclusion within competitive employment.

Further to the above, PWD who receive a DG are subject to income limits, and are required to report all income obtained to ensure that their salary or wages do not surpass these limits. Within PWs, income generation is often low, seasonal, and dependent on product sales[14]. This means that although PWID in PWs are working, they are not *gainfully employed,* that is, PWID are not engaging in a employment that allows them to earn consistent income to support themselves, and they remain excluded from competitive employment. Competitive employment is valued for the access it provides to a steady income, employment benefits, and integrated work opportunities. Lastly, PWID and their caregivers/guardians/families are often poorly informed regarding DG eligibility and suspension criteria, leaving them vulnerable to site-specific remuneration policies and practices within the PW, that may require that PWID forfeit all, or part of their DG, to access employment opportunities and services, that have a poor likelihood of ensuring access to competitive employment[8].

The issue of 'separateness'

A social development initiative, PW were initially a community integration/inclusion strategy, towards disability inclusion in communities and participation within economic/income generation activities. The benefits of which included an increased sense of belonging, relationship building and skills training in a 'safe' environment, which was dependent on their preferred pace[8]. Over the years protective workshops have garnered criticism for offering menial job-tasks that are repetitive, outdated and deny PWID the opportunity for creative expression, work aligned with their interests or capabilities, opportunity to earn a decent wage, and limited prospects for personal and/or business growth or expansion[14]. Recent developments within PW have, through partnerships in both the public and private sector, developed as enterprises, and offer increased product range, services, and skills-sets to businesses within the mainstream economy. Even so, this type of work remains largely separate from mainstream work environments, and still carries the legacy of charity work, characteristic of most endeavours that advocate for the employment of PWD[15].

Separate workplaces for PWID, play a role in sustaining disability myths. This perpetuates the perceptions and stereotypes that consider PWID a burden, or a barrier, to productivity within the workplace. Excluding PWID from mainstream work environments sustains these attitudes, and allows them to continue unchallenged. South Africa's history of Apartheid, a violently oppressive system founded on the idea of 'separate development', offers prime examples of the potentially harmful and pervasive effects of a separatist doctrine. Despite multiple economic development and social justice policies aimed at redress, the legacy of Apartheid remains entrenched in South Africa's social fabric, warranting the urgent need for inclusive and equitable employment strategies that will confront disability exclusion and stigma in the workplace, *and* continue to provide social assistance for PWID.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The authors recognise that to address the complexity of the issue requires a coordination of efforts, with diverse stakeholders, across multiple sectors. With this in mind, the following recommendations are offered as practical steps that ID service-providers, partners, policy makers, and researchers can implement, to support the socio-economic health and wellbeing of PWID within PWs.

Adopting a Supported Employment (SE) model

Despite the critique offered above, research supports that PWs are both ideally placed and positioned to facilitate the process of integration of PWD, especially those with ID, into the open labour market through implementation of a supported employment approach[7]. One such approach is SE, which is founded on the premise that with adequate support, PWD can be trained to do *any* job. More specifically, with the correct type and duration of support, PWD will be empowered to participate in competitive employment, and should receive equal treatment, and wages, as stipulated by the Code of Good Practice on Disability in the Workplace[16]. SE offers support to all parties involved in the employment process (jobseekers and their families, potential employers and workplaces) for as long as is required[13]. At present, the most significant barriers to the implementation of SE in South Africa include the cost of the implementation, poor policy implementation, a lack of intersectoral collaboration and discriminatory attitudes regarding the contribution of PWID and other PWD in the workplace[17]. These barriers, considered over and above the general lack of employment opportunities in South Africa, highlights the potential for SE to address employment challenges broadly, and to extend beyond disability to include other marginalized groups.

Protective workshops as potential Supported Employment hubs

PW hold the potential to develop into community-based integrated workspaces where facility-based activities and community-based opportunities (SE) could facilitate access to employment in the OLM and financial literacy[8]. Presently, career advancement within a PW largely depends on the opportunities and partnerships negotiated by the management staff. Should PWs adopt an SE model, these sites could potentially serve as 'hubs' for the training and transitioning of *all* citizens who experience employment constraints, offering integrated spaces for learning, gaining support and obtaining employment for PWID and their families. The DG should remain as a form of social assistance, and should *supplement* the income of the PWID, rather than replace it. This is particularly important within the context of poverty, as the gaps between DG access, job creation, and the PWDs right to work, place PWID in a very disempowering position, because they are viewed as being unfit to work. This consideration is thus imperative to the survival of PWID, and the social struggles experienced within the broader context of poverty, and what it means to be disabled in South Africa.

An Engaged Research Approach

Inclusive research approaches involving practitioners, service providers, PWID, and their families, is critical if the vocational services allocated to PWD are to positively impact the PWID, their families and significant others[19]. Community based participatory research (CBPR) is an example of an inclusive approach that has potential to bridge the gaps identified, and support the growth of supported employment and vocational transition spaces for PWID. This research approach is also essential to effectively address systemic disparities between those who formulate and review policy, those who implement policy, and those whom it directly impacts. Advocacy initiatives in the disability sector should demand that the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA), adopt a multidisciplinary perspective, relating to the DG's eligibility requirements and means testing, to allow for the participation of PWID, their families and various stakeholders, in policy formulation, implementation, and refinement[8,9]. Inclusive research, or CBPR approaches, hold potential to ensure that the social assistance services and employment services offered, are responsive to the lived experiences of PWID in South Africa, which may shed some light on the changes needed to address the DG efficacy, and implementation challenges discussed.

CONCLUSION

There is an urgent need to reflect on the role of PWs towards the economic and social participation of PWID in society, particularly as this relates to securing competitive employment, without compromising the social assistance offered by the DG. SE has been identified as an effective employment strategy to achieve this, and requires intersectoral collaboration between departments of health, education, labour, civil society, NGO's, and small business enterprises. The development of appropriate funding models that are responsive to the poverty risks of PWID is essential, also, strategic partnerships that include PWID and their families will ensure that they are empowered to make informed decisions about their livelihoods and social security status. The establishment of such partnerships and self-advocacy platforms, should review the value and parameters of the DG, to ensure these align with the National Minimum Wage Act 9 of 2018[20], and represent the socio-economic support needs of PWID and their families in South Africa.

Conflicts of interest

All authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Author contribution

All listed authors conceptualised and drafted the paper. S. Adams and L. Ned prepared the final draft, which was approved by all three authors.

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