

A place for our Feet in the Sun

Reginald M.J. Oduor

A Speech delivered on the Occasion of the Launching of the World Bank Public Information Centre on 14th September, 2004 by Reginald Oduor, lecturer in Philosophy, University of Nairobi and Secretary of the Society of Professionals with Visual Disabilities

Ladies and Gentlemen

We are gathered here today to witness the launching of the World Bank Public Information Centre. As you are probably aware, the centre has actually been in operation for a while now, providing members of the public with a unique opportunity to access information that would otherwise be too costly for most of them.

I speak to you today on behalf of a very new but very vibrant association called the Society of Professionals with Visual Disabilities. As you know, most information is presented in visual form – as books, newspapers, journals, films, videos or Internet files. While those with hearing, speaking, handling or walking disabilities can all use sight to gather information, this is the very thing that persons with visual disabilities cannot do without some kind of assistance to overcome this sensory hurdle.

One of the outstanding features of the launch today is the inclusion of adaptive or assistive technology for persons with visual disabilities at the centre. “Adaptive” or “assistive” technology refers to various innovations that enable persons with disabilities to circumvent their sensory limitations in the use of information and communication technology. Such tools are actually available in the market, but at prices that are simply out of reach for many of those who need them. However, this Public Information Centre is equipped with the relevant software and hardware, and makes the use of them available to those who need them without charge. Allow me to give you an idea of the kind of technology that we persons with visual disabilities will enjoy here.

For those with low vision, the computer screen is difficult to read. However, there is a programme called “Magic” – an acronym for “Magnification in Colour”, which does just that.

Persons with total visual disability simply cannot read the computer screen. Consequently, they need screen-readers – computer software which verbalizes the various messages on a computer screen. With this software, they will be able to compose and edit documents, send and receive e-mail, browse the Internet, and even write computer programmes all without sighted assistance. The particular screen-reader available here is called JAWS – an acronym for “Job Access With Speech”. Alternatively, such persons will access data from the computer using a Braille Display – an innovation which produces virtual Braille on a panel.

Furthermore, when persons with total visual disability wish to read printed documents, they will be able to scan them using optical character recognition software, and then access their contents either through the screen-reading software or the Braille Display.

There is also a Braille embosser, which is really the equivalent of a printer. The software used with it translates a document from a word processing programme into Braille software, after which the embosser prints out a Braille version of the document. This is how I produced the Braille copy of this speech.

Many persons with total visual disability have used Braille for centuries, and Braille will continue to be an important tool for them. **However, the cost of producing books in Braille is much higher than that of producing them as soft copies which such persons can then access through screen readers or Braille displays. Thus using a screen-reader, I am today enjoying reading Greek philosophical classics downloaded from the Internet after years of being starved of them.**

As you are aware, the Internet is a goldmine of information on almost any topic under the sun. Yet I know no single cyber café in Kenya which makes adaptive technology available. Consequently, apart from the high cost of accessing the Web in such places, persons with visual disabilities have had to make do with whatever help they can get from friends and personal assistants. With the launch of this Public Information Centre however, we in the community of persons with visual disabilities can now come in here, and enjoy accessing the Web effectively and without worrying about the cost.

While education is crucial to the empowerment of every member of the society, it is pivotal to the rehabilitation and overall development of persons with visual disabilities. A number of such persons have excelled in their academic pursuits and taken up positions of great responsibilities as lawyers, teachers, lecturers, members of parliament, among others. However, in the extremely fast changing world in which we live, the need for continuing education has never been more urgent. Yet with the emergence of the information age, persons with visual disabilities are in danger of being left behind, and this at the very time when it is theoretically much easier to avail information to them. This centre will greatly contribute to bridging the information divide between the sighted and the visually disabled. **For example, I have been a Lecturer in Philosophy for over ten years now. Yet because of the difficulty of accessing information, my doctoral dissertation remains undone. Now with this centre, my hope of completing that work has been rekindled.**

Nevertheless, more needs to be done by all sectors of society to create an environment in which persons with visual disabilities can actualize their potentials more fully. The government's role in this regard is crucial. We do not recall any questions on disability in national population census questionnaires. In our view, this is evidence that the government's perception of its responsibilities towards such persons is far from desirable. How could the government possibly plan for the welfare of persons with disabilities if it does not even have facts and figures about them? We therefore urge the government to take seriously the presence of persons with disabilities in all their planning.

An enabling legal environment is also essential to the progress of such persons. We were therefore delighted when the Disability Act got presidential assent at the end of last year. **We however urge the government to operationalise that Act as a matter of urgency.**

A few months ago, I heard President Thabo Mbeki tell his people that his government was committed to ensuring that no South African can complain that he was not given a place in the sun. Of course once we all have a place in the sun, we have various options of what to do with it – we can simply bask in it, engage in agriculture (with ample water as well of course), bake bricks, tap solar energy to light and warm our homes, and so on. But if we are not given our place in the sun, all such options are unavailable. In the same way, the availability of adaptive information technology to persons with disabilities gives them the option to do business, pursue academics, read for pleasure, and so on.

Archimedes (287-212 B.C.E), The ancient preeminent Greek mathematician and inventor, once declared: “Give me a place to stand on and I will move the earth.” King Hiero of Syracuse, who was absolutely astonished by the statement, asked him to prove it. In the harbor was a ship that had proved impossible to launch even by the combined efforts of all the men of Syracuse. Archimedes, who had been examining the properties of levers and pulleys, built a machine that allowed him to single-handedly move the ship from a distance away. **We persons with disabilities say to government, private sector and civil society, , “Give us a place to stand on in the information age, and we will contribute to moving the society from underdevelopment to progress.”** The world bank has made a significant contribution in this regard, and we urge others to follow in the bank’s example by identifying other areas of concern to us and moving decisively to address them.

One very outstanding aspect of this project has been the inclusion of persons with visual disabilities in its very formation. Mrs Muthembwa has been in close contact with the Society of Professionals with Visual Disabilities, listening to our perspective, with a view to making the project as relevant as possible. This is in sharp contrast to many other projects which are done “for the blind”, treating them as passive recipients who do not even know what is good for them. In the World Blind Union, we now have the motto: “Nothing for us without us”, and I hope that this message will spread far and wide.

On behalf of all persons with visual disabilities, I would therefore like to most sincerely thank the World Bank for giving us this unique opportunity to be part and parcel of the information age. This project is a great boost to our endeavours to move ourselves from the fringes of society to its very core. As we often say, we do not need pity; we need opportunity, and this centre provides just that. Once the professionals with visual disabilities have easy access to information, they will be able not only to pursue their personal career goals, but also to contribute to the welfare of their non-professional visually disabled colleagues.

Thank you.

Reginald M.J. Oduor

Interim Secretary, Society of Professionals with Visual Disabilities
Lecturer in Philosophy, University of Nairobi, College of Education and External Studies, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Tel. 254-020-781988, 254-0722-625555, E-mail: rmjoduor@uonbi.ac.ke

