

Speech of the Honourable Minister of Health and Social Services, Comrade Dr Richard Nchabi Kamwi, on the occasion of the Opening of the workshop to sensitize Namibian Parliamentarians on disability as a human rights, social and development issue: Wednesday 22 October 2008

Director of Ceremony,

Right Hon Prime Minister Comr. Nahas Angula,

His Excellency the British High Commissioner, Mr. Mark Bensberg,

Hon Hendrietta Bogopane-Zulu, Member of Parliament in South Africa,

Hon. Members of Parliament,

Hon Hartmut Ruppel former Member of Parliaments he not a former now Board Chairperson of the Chechire Disability Namibia.

Organizations of People with Disabilities, ladies and gentlemen all Protocol observed.

I am extremely happy to witness this historical event. I would therefore like to thank all people concerned who have been involved in putting this workshop together to make this dream come true, and sincerely hope that it will enhance, refresh and update the Parliamentarians on the subject of disability as a human rights, developmental and crosscutting issue. I strongly wish that we can generate all positive ideas that will create an environment that will leave no one behind in our country and that we all can live in a barrier-free society.

I understand that this workshop is not the end and that from time to time we will be having working lunches among Parliamentarians and Organizations of people with disabilities and different Stakeholders for us to keep track of topical issues in disability as well as to monitor what we are learning from occasions such as this workshop.

Through the establishment of the National Disability Council which has responsibility in terms of Act No. 26 of 2004 to spearhead as well as to monitor the implementation of the National Policy on Disability, our government has expressed its unswerving commitment to the upliftment and improvement of the conditions of those members in our society who are discriminated against on account of their impairments and difference. After all, we can not all be the same and look alike. Difference should not be a basis for

marginalization and discrimination. If we perpetuate these practices, we would not be acting differently from apartheid rulers who discriminated against us because we were black.

With the establishment of the National Disability Council each and every Ministry is required to report annually to the Council on what they are doing by way of disability programs to implement the National Policy on Disability. For a long time across the world, including Namibia, disability issues have been confused with health issues, but things have begun to change in Namibia due to the political will of our leaders. The thrust of the National Policy on Disability requires that disability issues should be discussed at all levels of development and the state, from the President's Office right down to the local level.

We are proud as a government that to date we have at the domestic level passed policies and laws as well as ratified various international instruments and conventions affirming our abiding commitment to accept persons with disabilities as an integral part of our population. We have thus created the necessary policy environment that promotes issues of disability at all levels. These policies, laws, conventions and instruments include the following:

- The National Policy on Disability (1997)
- The National Council on Disability Act, No. 26 of 2004.
- The ratification by Namibia of the Continental Plan of Action concerning people with disabilities
- The signature and subsequent ratification during 2007 by Namibia of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.
- The Affirmative Action (Employment Act, 1998 (Act No. 29 of 1998)

The National Policy on Disability, 1997, paved the way for persons with disabilities to be included at all levels of the Namibian society. The recent ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by our government puts more pressure on us to implement more disability

related programs. And as much as we have ratified various international conventions affirming our commitment, we still lag behind in terms of understanding the obligations we have incurred and the implications behind the commitments we have accepted to guide our actions. We are now required to implement those obligations and commitments that arise from the instruments we have ratified. Allow me therefore Honorable members to commend the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social and Community Development for organizing such an important workshop in collaboration with Leonard Cheshire Southern Africa and VSO Namibia, both of whom have jointly funded this event.

It is befitting, perhaps, that we should also recognize that Namibia in this SADC region and elsewhere in the continent is one of few countries that provides a leading example in terms of proactive and forward looking policies aimed at advancing the position in society of people with disabilities. We should be rightly proud of this reputation, while at the same time we should not sit back in complacency but continue to build on the progress we have already made.

Our commitment therefore expresses our focus on the abilities and potential of people with disabilities to be full and active members of our society who as equal citizens should be able to contribute to national development at every level they may chose. We have chosen to focus not on their disabilities, because we all have disabilities and limitations, but instead on their abilities. This commitment to disabled people translates to us having an obligation to provide equal education and employment opportunities to them; to ensure that our built environment, including the public transport system, information, health services are accessible to them on an equal basis with the rest of society and that we must treat them with the respect due to every human being, and not as objects of pity.

To the extent that the policy environment we have created must be seen to benefit people with disabilities, it also must allow their voice and active participation at all levels in our nation. The 2001 National Census put their

total population at more that 85 000 people. They are therefore not a small part of this nation. They are voters as well, so let us be careful. Any programs, at whatever level that are aimed at social, economic and political development must include, proportionally at least, people with disabilities so that they are visible at all levels from decision making to implementation, monitoring and evaluation in order to ensure that their needs and interests are addressed on an equal basis with the rest of society.

An important cap to Namibia's inspirational role is that the process towards the formal declaration of the African Decade for People with Disabilities was kick started from our country in May 1999. In 1999 the then Labour and Social Affairs Commission of the OAU at its 22nd Ordinary Session that was held in Windhoek, Namibia recommended that the decade 1999-2009 be proclaimed as the African Decade of Disabled Persons. At the launch of the African Union in Durban, South Africa, the Decade was declared as one of the resolutions of the newly formed AU.

The Decade was aimed at focusing attention and resources on improving the quality of life of Africans with disabilities across the continent. Now that the AU Ministers of Social Affairs are due to meet in Windhoek soon (27 – 31st October), perhaps they will consider again the issue of whether we should not renew the Decade and keep the focus on the work that still has to be accomplished. For example, when the Decade was proclaimed, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities was only an idea, but today it exists. I have no doubt that the African and Asian Decades had a lot of influence on the passing of the Convention.

As government and head of the Ministry responsible for disability issues, we do take note that issues of disability, in spite of the existence of the Decade,

have not been taken up equally by all States in the continent. Much remains to be done and the Decade is coming to an end next year 2009. We are therefore fully supporting the recommendation by Disabled People's Organizations in Africa to renew the African Decade. We hope that our African colleagues will support the lobby for renewal of the Decade.

Lastly may I take this opportunity to introduce the Hon Prime Minister and invite him to officially open the workshop and in the same vain to launch the Hand Book for Parliamentarians.

Thank You