

**Presentation to the Limpopo Portfolio Committee on
Social Development on the
Children's Amendment Bill
(7 April 2006 draft):**

Christina Sadiki

Limpopo provincial chairperson

Disabled Children's Action Group (DICAG)

Ph: 015 291 5326

March 2007

Profile of the Disabled Children's Action Group

The Disabled Children's Action Group (DICAG) was established in 1992 and is closely affiliated to Disabled People South Africa (DPSA). The organisation has mobilised over 12 000 parents of disabled children, of whom 3 800 are registered members. There are 86 affiliated local parent branches, with representation from all of the nine provinces, with its head office in Cape Town. The focus of DICAG at local level is advocacy, monitoring the implementation of government policy, capacity building and parent empowerment.

DICAG is the largest national parent organisation in Africa. The work that it has done in terms of addressing issues of children with disabilities has been recognised nationally and internationally. DICAG is currently a member of Disabled People International, as well as Inclusion International and is involved in a number of initiatives including prevention of violence against children, and improving the quality of life of children with disability.

DICAG has two key programmes - *development* and *advocacy*. The development programme seeks to

- empower parents of children with disability with knowledge and life skills to be able to respond to their children's rights and needs;
- empower children with disability to be self-advocates on their own issues, and
- provide support for individuals and centres to develop their capacity and organisational skills.

The advocacy programme aims to

- ensure that government and human rights bodies formulate and implement policies that will facilitate the full inclusion and participation of children with disabilities by addressing barriers;
- promote and protect the rights of children with disabilities and
- affirm the abilities of children with disability and the contribution that they can make to creating a "Society for All".

Executive summary

The Children's Act, which was signed in to law by the President in June 2006, makes specific provisions for children with disability. It reflects government's commitment to removing discriminatory practices which have excluded these children from many aspects of appropriate service provision. The Act also undertakes to provide an enabling environment for children with disability - one which responds inclusively and appropriately.

What does this mean in terms of specific areas of service provision? This submission identifies key areas for consideration in the Children's Amendment Bill in terms of inclusion of children with disability. In each section of the Children's Amendment Bill, it calls for:

- each chapter to include a plan for *ensuring equal access and equal opportunities* for children with disability or chronic illness
- the fostering of *enabling environments* for children with disability through:
 - *programmes* that are inclusive of children with disability
 - ensuring *physical access* for all children, as well as a safe environment for them
 - *training* for personnel working with children, which includes diversity training.

Children with disability require a great deal of support, particularly in their early years. It is critical that they have access to ECD services. Government needs to take responsibility for the many disabled children currently in informal and partial care centres, so that the necessary support and monitoring can be instituted. These recommendations are made with the recognition that the Children's Amendment Bill needs to take a comprehensive and intersectoral approach to ensure prevention and early intervention for children with disability. Finally, child and youth care centres, in addition to responding to the diversity of children, and reflecting this diversity in its management structures, need to equip young people with making the transition to the outside world.

1. Introduction

The Integrated National Disability Strategy was published in 1997 and is based on the Constitution of South Africa. It contains a vision of a "Society for All", in which differences are celebrated, and persons with disability are seen as citizens with rights, and not as helpless and tragic victims who are dependent on the welfare of others.

In the Children's Act, there are several key clauses which reflect government's commitment to this vision for children:

- In Chapter 2 (General Principles), the Act protects children against unfair discrimination on the basis of disability. It also undertakes to create an *enabling environment* to respond to the special needs that the child has.
- Clause 11 details key areas around which consideration must be given to children with disability or chronic illness.

Often people think that inclusion means 'treating all children the same.' The problem with this is that it does not recognize that disabled children have an unequal start in life, and therefore equality cannot be achieved without certain provisions being made to ensure that they can participate equally.

*"Inclusion does not mean that disabled children should just slot into an unchanging society. This denies both disability and difference. It is about disabled children having their needs met and their rights protected in an adapting society. Most importantly, disabled people (both adults and children), should be involved in shaping an inclusive society."*¹

What does it mean to create an inclusive and enabling environment for children with disability in the Children's Amendment Bill? Within DICAG, we believe that it means recognizing the current barriers that exist which exclude children with disability from getting access to effective services, and working towards the removal of these.

2. Recommendations for every chapter

DICAG believes that each chapter describing a particular service should include a plan for *ensuring equal access and equal opportunities* for children with disability. We also recommend that the inclusion of children with disability takes into account the following aspects:

- *programmes* that are inclusive of children with disability
- *accessibility* for all children – both to the environment (buildings, playgrounds etc) and to information
- *training* for personnel, which includes diversity training.

Parents of children with disability and disabled young people themselves need to be involved as partners in developing inclusive services.

¹ Save the Children UK 2000. Community based rehabilitation. Global review and seminar report. SCF UK.

3. Recommendations for specific chapters

Chapter 5: Partial care

Many parents of disabled children in Limpopo start and run day care centres. The need for these centres arises because most of their disabled children have severe and/or multiple disabilities and existing special schools only accommodate children with single disabilities.

Recommendations

- ✓ There needs to be appropriate skills training provided to parents running these partial care centres
- ✓ Access to subsidies needs to be improved, including user-friendly application processes.

Chapter 6: Early Childhood Development (ECD)

Currently, many disabled children are not getting access to ECD services. The reasons for their exclusion include fear, prejudices and negative attitudes on the part of other parents. Often edu-care workers do not agree to admit disabled children to their centres, as they say that they are not trained to cater for these children.

Recommendations:

- ✓ An inclusive approach must be promoted through awareness programmes which target parents, community members and edu-care workers
- ✓ Training needs to be provided to people who are implementing ECD programmes.

Chapter 8: Prevention and early intervention

Disabled children and their families often find it extremely difficult to access the services that they require. This is due to poor and irregular service delivery, particularly in rural areas. Mothers have to walk long distances to clinics carrying their older disabled children on their backs. As a result they , cannot go frequently to clinics and/or Social Work offices as required. Frequently, it is very difficult for them to get hold of Social Workers. Another great difficulty is the lack of accessibility of information about available services.

Recommendations

- ✓ Prevention and early intervention should go hand in hand with continual efforts to raise awareness about disability within our communities
- ✓ Networking with different stakeholders on prevention and early intervention is important to ensure that they work together
- ✓ There needs to be strengthening of parents support groups at grass roots level, so that they can share experiences
- ✓ Families of disabled children and disabled adults need to be represented on community structures and relevant government committees to ensure that an inclusive approach is promoted within all services.

