Striving towards a multi-abled Singapore

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Tomorrow is the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, and marks the 25th anniversary of its proclamation by the United Nations General Assembly in 1992. It is an appropriate moment to reflect on what policies for people with disabilities in Singapore have achieved and identify possible future directions.

The beginnings of inclusion for people with disabilities in Singapore can be traced to 1980, when the UN declared as the International Year of Disabled Persons.

Leaders of the disability movement from around the world, frustrated at the lack of their representation in organisations that provided services for them, met in Singapore and established Disabled People’s International (DPI).

Not many people know this, but Singaporeans became the founding members of DPI, a fact we can take great pride in. The late Mr Ron Chaudhary-Harrier, whose sight was lost at 17, provided leadership for the early growth of DPI, which remains the only cross-disability international organisation advocating the full participation of disabled people in society. It has local chapters in over 130 countries and has a special consultative status at the United Nations.

In Singapore, Disabled Peoples’ Association was set up in 1980 as DPI’s local chapter.

From the beginning, DPI has espoused a “social model of disability” that focuses on eliminating barriers to full participation in society. This social model forms the basis of disability legislation and covenants, such as the Americans with Disability Act, the UK Equality Act, and the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The 1990s saw an increase in advocacy in Singapore. This led to the formation of the Advisory Council for the Disabled in 1988, which made wide-ranging recommendations, including the building code which was legislated and passed in 1990, setting the foundations for a more barrier-free environment.

In his speech in 2004, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made a commitment towards building an inclusive society in Singapore and even made special mention of people with disabilities. A national map of the Enabling Masterplan was launched in 2007 as a realisation of this commitment.

The Enabling Masterplan took a comprehensive life-course approach and has resulted in services from early intervention to special education and employment. Other key initiatives over the years have included Skill Future, tasked with focusing on the creation of employment opportunities and providing referrals to a range of schemes and services. The Enabling Village provides a model of an inclusive community space within an accessible town and supermarket, and restaurants that hire people with disabilities. A mainstream arts and disability scene has been established through the efforts of the National Arts Council, the Singapore International Foundation and British Council (Singapore).

Looking ahead, there is more to be done, in particular integrating meaningful participation by disabled people in the planning of policies and services. The disability community should mobilise themselves to deliberate on policy issues frequently instead of waiting for the Government to come up with a planning exercise every five years.

The Institute of Policy Studies is piloting a Disability Network to support the efforts of disability organisations to provide input from the ground up policymakers.

More knowledge about the needs of people with disabilities in Singapore is certainly required. And it starts with being able to provide basic and accurate figures on how many people are affected by disabilities, for which there are none. One reason has been the reliance on the enumeration of disability service users, which is unreliable. However, we can look forward to the next census in 2020, which will capture data about disability in the population to aid policy planning.

The lack of a unified definition of “disability” in Singapore complicates matters. The Enabling Masterplan defines disabled people as those whose “normal” function is reduced due to a physical, cognitive, sensory, or emotional or developmental impairment.

However, in terms of implementing disability policies, Singapore takes a pragmatic approach, where each policy is geared towards those who require assistance. The ongoing census exercise provides an opportunity for Singapore to come up with a clearer definition of what it means to be disabled.

It is important to take to heart “Nothing About Us, Without Us”, a guiding principle of the disability community for their inclusion in decisions that affect them. Perhaps the next chairman of the Enabling Masterplan can be a person with a disability or be elected by the community.

Beyond basic information, we need to address the persistent ignorance that takes root across our societies. This is reflected in the perspectives of disabled people as full and deserving members of society. It is true for our local universities to start disability studies programmes, which are becoming more popular in universities across the United States and Britain. Baseline informing policies, they can also serve as an avenue to train the next generation inclusivity and inclusion.

Finally, having made great strides in the provision of support and services, we should strive towards true community and cultural inclusion, where disabled people are not only accessible, but also accepted into the cultural fibre of Singapore. An inclusive society in the future must not just be one that is multi-cultural and multiracial, but also multi-disabled.