

It's time to budget with the disabled, Uhuru

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By Phitalis Masakhwe

It is no longer acceptable for the disabled to be abandoned to a life of dependency, misery and frustration. They now have a right under international law to sue governments if subjected to economic situations that push them to inhuman and degrading conditions.

As you read this article, technocrats at the Treasury are collecting and collating stakeholders' views and needs to help piece together this year's Budget. In a fiercely competitive interest groups democracy such as ours, only the strong may find their issues captured in the Budget.

And coming against a backdrop of worldwide economic meltdown, issues of persons with disability may not make it on Government's priority list. Will the disabled smile when finally the Minister for Finance reads the Budget? Will the words 'disability' or 'persons with disability' feature?

It is interesting to note the Government has never candidly recognised the disabled population as a vital national human resource. They are mostly viewed from charity viewpoint, as objects of pity.

Successive governments have treated, preserved and protected wildlife better than the disabled. That is why we have a ministry and rich parastatal, the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), and nothing to write home about the disabled.

Budgets are meant to help a country move towards attaining agreed development goals. How, for instance, can we achieve Vision 2030 and Millennium Development Goals by 2015 in a nation where majority of people live at the mercy of others merely on account of their disability?

The disabled are aware of multiple contending needs and challenges facing the Finance Minister as we gear up to Budget Day. Although they will not be petitioning him on everything, they will pitch for some bare minimum. They want the minister to set aside resources for the National Development Fund for the Disabled.

This fund, which is established by the Persons With Disability Act 2003, should have been in place six years ago, yet to date no penny has been allocated. When operational, the fund will radically change economic landscape for the disabled. They will easily borrow funds to initiate and bolster their businesses. The fund will equally provide social protection schemes and income maintenance for the severely disabled, who may be unable to engage in gainful employment.

To help mitigate the extra costs that disability presents, article 12 (3) of the Disability Act 2003 exempts the disabled from paying tax on their salaries, "an employee with a disability shall be entitled to exemption from tax on all income accruing from his employment".

The money saved on taxes will help them hire guides, buy assistive devices such as wheelchairs, white canes and related support services. Although the rules and regulations to guide the implementation of this article and others in the Disability Act have been finalised, courtesy of support from UNDP, the government has not gazetted and implemented this law.

Inclusive education, including special needs education where applicable, is indispensable for Kenyans with disability. Already, the Ministry of Finance has been allocating resources to the sector, albeit measly considering the many needs and demands in the field. The disabled will love to see increased allocation in this sector, but more importantly strict monitoring mechanisms to ensure such money improves and enhances the learning and teaching environment and facilities for children with special needs.

At the moment, a sporadic check in most schools across the country does not show or reflect those allocations.

Another key proposal that the Finance minister should consider is increasing resources to the National Council for Persons with Disabilities to enhance its infrastructure, technical capacity and efficiency to serve the disabled. At the moment, the ramshackle and kiosk-looking like council's headquarters in Westlands can't offer much.

The council desperately needs money to undertake its statutory roles, such as creation of awareness on disability, development and maintenance of data bank on the disabled and their groups.

Other roles include increasing the reservation of employment opportunities for the disabled in public and private sector, carrying out research on disability and related issues, and strengthening the capacity of the disabled people's organisations.

Mr. Uhuru Kenyatta, you can do a lot to widen choices and opportunities for Kenyans with disabilities. All Kenyans deserve a chance and a share of the national pie.

The writer is a sociologist with a physical disability.

mphitalis@yahoo.com