Making public service delivery more accessible to people with disabilities: The South African government narrative

Mandisi Matyana (a) *, Xolani Thusi (b)

(a) Lecturer, Department of Public Administration, University of Zululand, KwaDlangezwa-Main Campus, Empangeni, South Africa
(b) Senior Lecturer, Department of Public Administration, University of Limpopo*, Polokwane, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Citizens with disabilities have the same rights as those without disabilities, and they are entitled to the same benefits as everyone else. Because of their mobility, people who do not have disabilities have greater access to public services. People with disabilities typically face difficulties in accessing government services due to the location of government offices, the physical structure of such offices, and the fact that they rely on others to access some of the services provided by the government. More government offices are located in urban areas, while the majority of people with disabilities live in rural areas, making it even more difficult for them to access government services such as health facilities, educational institutions, civic and social services. This paper examines what the South African government can do to make service delivery even more accessible to people with disabilities.

To benefit this paper, the qualitative approach was used to collect data through a review of secondary sources.

Article history:
Received 12 June 2023
Received in rev. form 09 Sept. 2023
Accepted 26 Sept. 2023

Keywords:
Citizens, Disabilities, Government, Rights, Service Provision

JEL Classification:
M38

Introduction

People with Disabilities, like all other citizens, have both rights and obligations. People-centered development has been adopted by South African government, and this will be achieved by increasing participation of People with Disabilities as consumers of public services (Department of Social Development, 2010). According to Masiya et al. (2019); Thusi et al (2023a), local governments are expected to act reasonably in order to provide everyone with basic services such as housing, water, refuse collection, and electricity, as well as to intentionally ensure that the poor, particularly vulnerable citizens such as women and children, have improved access to adequate basic services. Furthermore, Section 9 of the 1996 Constitution bans municipalities from discriminating against people based on their race, gender, HIV/AIDS status, disability, or any other protected ground while providing services (s. 9 of the Constitution). As a result, municipalities are frequently in the spotlight among South African citizens, who see them as the center of service delivery due to their constitutional mission and the role they play in bringing public services closer to the people. Despite the fact that people with disabilities make up 7.5% of the South African population, access to public services remains a major barrier (Presence, 2022; Matyana and Thusi, 2023).

South Africa remains one of the world’s most unequal countries, with disparities in health access and outcomes based on racial, regional, and socioeconomic factors. People with disabilities continue to be among the most vulnerable and marginalized members of society. According to 2022 household and census data, they continue to be poorer, with fewer access to government services like as health, social services, and education than their non-disabled counterparts (Bezuidenhout, 2022). Poverty is another persistent obstacle that disabled persons encounter on a daily basis in South Africa. Everyone is aware that different economic, social, political, and economic concerns interact to generate marginalization, underdevelopment, a lack of service delivery, and insufficient access to People with Disabilities resources.
The limiting environment and socioeconomic hurdles are to blame for the disadvantages and systematic deprivation that disabled people face, ranging from public transportation to barrier-free channels of communication and building accessibility (Ngcobo, 2021). Therefore, this paper is undertaken to give more insight on how disabled people are being excluded from accessing public goods and services provided by the government. The main purpose of this insight is to ensure that disabled people do not feel left out in the enjoyment of many various goods and services provided by the government, more especially in the local sphere of government. The study also aiming at providing specific recommendations of what could be done to empower and include disability people in various platforms of accessing service delivery.

In order to understand how to make service delivery more accessible to people with disability the study has used the qualitative method. This method was used to narrate more on the study subject. It also assisted to reach new conclusions and achieve the study objective. Qualitative method focuses on giving more insight about the matter by describing the phenomena in detail (Matyana and Mthethwa, 2022a; Thusi et al., 2023b). The study has relied on the secondary data to achieve its aim, meaning that it used the existing or published literature review.

The study has focused more on published journals and reports relevant to the study objective, particularly on disabled people and service delivery. The published journals and reported were also selected based aera, of which the period of the past five years was used. This area assisted the researcher to ensure that the study objectives are achieved, and the results of the study are credible. Furthermore, the secondary data has assisted the researchers to understand more on what is already said by other scholars and relevant organisations; and where to improve going forward in ensuring that South African service delivery is more accessible to disabled people.

**Statistics on disabled people in RSA (obstacles they have faced on accessing public service delivery)**

There are numerous challenges and difficulties that people with disability face, which need a strategic intervention and actions from the government (Sigwaza and Jili, 2022). These challenges are caused by the mistakes from the government while others are caused by the nature of our societies. However, government must take a leading role in tackling these issues. Rotarou et al., 2021, state that across the globe there are common challenges facing disabled people. These challenges include barriers to accessing health care, increased poverty, lower employment, and lower education levels. As a result of these issues, disabled people are living under harsh conditions, and during COVID19 pandemic the situation was far worst for them (Rotarou, 2021). However, these are not only challenges they face. They also face some challenges when it comes to service delivery access such as the location of government offices more especial in local government as the closet sphere to them, physical structure of offices, lack of government action towards addressing their concerns. This section is elaborating on these challenges, with the aim of giving an insight or broader picture how disabled people are affected as a result of these challenges. Later, the study will identify the possible strategic actions to overcome these issues. It is important that, before we look at the challenges that face disabled people in accessing the service delivery, let’s look at the statistics of disabled people international, regional, and local.

Numbers of statistic of people with disability continues to rise worldwide, due to couples of reasons such as health issues and aging. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), currently 16% (1.3 billion) of the world population is living with disabilities. This percentage is equivalent to the quarter of the world population, and it is mostly contributed by the non-communicable diseases (WHO: 2011). Furthermore, this percentage consist of both children and adults. It is normal that developing countries are having more disability associated issues than developed countries. This is due to the responsive measures by the governments and by the society. This is also supported by Nyangweso (2018), that 80 percent of the world disability population is coming from developing countries. Africa as a developing continent, disability statistic is bit high. Nyangweso (2018), indicates that 40% of the African population is living with disability attributed by both physical and mental disabilities. This assertion is also supported by the United Nations. Most of the people who are facing disability are living in poor parts of the African continent. They do not have access to basic necessary items such as wheelchairs, medical health, day care centres and etc. It is also argued that in Africa, education for disability people is less accommodative as a result most of them are illiterate and depends on begging on the streets. However, in some country’s government do offer a support grant for disabled people, which assist to make sure that they have access to basic needs such food and toiletries. In South Africa, the disability status is said to be sizable, because only 7.5% (2, 35 million) of country’s population is disabled (Morris et al., 2021). Free State province is leading in terms of people with disability, followed by Northern Cape, North West. Gauteng province is ranked as a province with least disabled people. Statistics prove that in South Africa females are more disabled than man.

**Challenges**

To tackle various challenges facing disabled people in South Africa, the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) was established. To be specific, “to promote respect for human rights and a culture of human rights; to promote the protection, development and attainment of human rights; and to monitor and assess the observance of human rights in South Africa”. Even though the SAHRC is existing to protect the rights of disabled people, however some of the challenges are still existing, particularly in receiving the service delivery. These challenges are explained below:
Location and physical structure of offices

Working space, particularly offices are vital when it comes to the government operations. They play an important part in the implementation of government policies. They are regarded as key vehicles of ensuring daily practices of service delivery. Government offices must be accessible to the employees and to the community as well. The accessibility of government offices improves citizen’s understanding towards service delivery and development projects undertaken (Li and Shang, 2020). Li and Shang also comprehend that the accessibility of government offices improves the community participation in the government programmes and policies. In South Africa there is a normal trend that most of the government offices are located in urban areas rather rural areas, which this makes it difficult for rural citizens to access them and get service from them. In other words, the longer the distance between government offices and communities hinders the effective coordination between the government and the beneficiaries of the services. According to Clifford (2020), disabled people are the most affected people within the society if the government offices are far, particularly the local offices hence they must travel long distances while they are under the influence of health issues sometimes. In some instances, disabled people are seemed to be neglected when it comes to services delivery hence, they are treated as ordinary people. This assertion is also supported by (Stienstra, 2020), indicating that disabled people sometimes are being forgotten when it comes to consultation procedures and measures of the government. This concern goes further to extend that some of the government offices are not conducive to host the disabled people (Shaheen and Lohnes Watulak, 2019). Government offices must respond to the special needs of disabled people, by having equipment and material that are able to cater for their special needs such as the availability of wheelchairs, lifts, effective pavements, toilets etc.

Dependency to others

Most of the disabled people are unable to take care of themselves. They are depending on others help to survive, hence some of them are more physical, mental challenged, while others suffer from blindness and paraplegic (Sharmila, Saini, Choudhary, Yuvrajja and Rahul, 2019). Due to these factors some they have become less competitive and lack capabilities to live on their own and as they wish. Parmenter (2021), indicates that the inability of disabled people to live on their own limits them to physical participate in government projects and programmes. Shpigelman and HaGani (2019), indicate the importance of support services to assist people with disability to fight with such dependency so they can participate in government service delivery projects and programmes. Government my try by all means to provide these support services. However, Shpigelman and HaGani (2019), also argue that in some instances the support services are not always assisting, because of the lifelong disability, which is the physical or mental disability. Lifelong disability is making it difficult for disabled citizens to be able to normally participate in service delivery programmes and projects.

Discrimination, stigma and negative thoughts associated with disability.

Discrimination is one of the major negative factors that continue to face various countries, societies and living settlements in the 21st century. People are being discriminated based on their culture, race, sex, disability etc. Discrimination is not good as it it harasses, victimise, confuse and broke the discriminated persons. The South African constitution condemns all forms of discriminations subjected to certain individuals within societies including the disabled ones. Ocran (2019), disabled people continue face discrimination, exclusion and social negative stigma of the society. This is due to the absences or poor implementation of proper policies and regulations for disabled people. According Dirth and Branscombe (2019), no matter what kind of discrimination subjected to disabled people, it should be overcomed and be corrected hence they are also human beings with same and equal rights as normal people. The discrimination and negative stigma towards the disabled people basically affect their self-concept (Shpigelman and HaGani, 2019). The discrimination and negative stigma against the disability doesn’t only ends in the social settlements only, but it also goes further to the service delivery initiatives and programmes. According to Kim (2019), disabled people should not be discriminated when it comes to service delivery, government must try to find innovative ways and systems to accommodate them. This could be done through the establishment of public-private organisations for disabled people, system of dealing with complains and improve the quality of life for disabled people as well (Kim, 2019).

Lack of government action

Poor or slow response of governments to address the special needs for disabled people is one of the key concerns facing disabled people, more especially in developing countries (Ebuenyi, et al., 2019). Various scholars such as Kachaje, Dube, MacLachlan and Mji (2014); Scior, Hamid, Hastings, Werner, Belton, Laniyan, Patel, Groce, and Kett (2016); Yilmaz (2020), have indicated the importance intervention of government actions and interventions for the disability people. These scholars believe that governments must protect the disabled people through established and recognised policies, through developing opportunities and through awareness programmes. In support Ibeke and Aduma (2019), state that the government actions ensure that disabled people are reasonable treated and live under anti-discrimination environment then become empowered to be able to understand their capabilities.

What the government can do to make service delivery even more accessible to people with disabilities (Future Prospects)

In ensuring that the above identified challenges do not affect the disabled people in the future, more especially when it comes to service delivery initiatives and programmes the study recommends the following actions:
Proper application of Batho Pele principles

In 1997, the South African government has established the Batho Pele principles to improve service delivery throughout the republic. The main aim of these principles is to ensure that government goods and services are delivered in a most effective and efficient way, by establishing and strengthening the skills and attitudes needed for the improved service delivery. This is also supported by Mojapelo et al., 2021, that Batho Pele principles were designed to ensure that there is a reliance good customer service in the public service and sector. Batho Pele principles also ensure that service delivery is done in an open manner while also maintaining balanced provision of goods and services (Matyana and Mthethwa, 2022b). Batho Pele principles include consultation, service standards, redress, access, courtesy, access, information and etc. One can note that these principles must be applied to all customers of service delivery, particularly the citizens, which are not limited to the disabled people. Therefore, the study recommends that throughout the re-public of South Africa government officials must maintain the application of Batho Pele principles when they are dealing with disabled people, more especial in the local sphere of government as the closest sphere of government to them and to the people. Government officials must ensure that these principles are defined and applied to the context of disabled citizens, so that they can have a fair access to the service delivery initiatives and programmes.

Partnership with NGOs

Non-Government Organisations (NGO’s) are groups that function independent from the government policies and directives even though they are still following or obliged by the state policies and laws. They are stabilized based on their constitutions and visions. Some of them are focusing on health activities, education, supporting the poor, reduction of crime and promotion of education. They are formed at different levels, namely at community, provincial, national, and international. According to Agyemang et al., 2019, NGO’s plays a crucial role in ensuring that human rights are protected and promoted. They also assist to protect vulnerable people throughout the world. NGOs ensures today’s and future living conditions are better for the individuals and also for the community. NGOs are also established to protected the special needs of the disabled people. They assist them to achieve more while also ensuring better progress of the future. This is also supported by Niewohner et al., 2020, that no one should be left out in the international development more especial the disabled ones. Disabled people usually face certain obstacles such as blindness, deaf which limits them from participating in service delivery initiatives and programmes adequately. Under such circumstances, but they should not be discriminated or be eliminated in the process. Government must try to find sufficient ways to assist them, such as partnering with NGOs for disabled people (Yilmaz, 2020), so to attend their special needs and improve their participation in service delivery.

Education workshops and awareness on disability

Workshops and awareness’s remain the pillar of development and progress. In dealing with disabled people in service delivery, workshops and awareness’s must be conducted for both community members and government officials. The community plays a crucial role in improving the government actions and programmes when they are aware and equipped to do so (Peterson and Quarstein, 2001). Education workshops and awareness’s on conditions of disabled people and their state is very important when dealing with and improving them (Roth, Pure, Rabinowitz and Kaufman-Scarborough, 2018). These workshops and awareness’s must be made for the communities where disabled people are based and expecting development from them. Workshops and awareness’s assist to teach both the community and government officials on conditions of the disabled people and how to deal with them and improve their participation more especial when it comes to service delivery.

Presentation of disabled people in all sectors

Disabled people should also take part in governance of various sectors, not limited to the ones that deal with service delivery. During the South African apartheid era, disabled people were discriminated based on their conditions, which purposively excluded them from employment opportunities in various sectors (Roux, 2022). This action was wrong to disabled people as it violated some of their human rights. However, in the freedom era, the South African government has introduced the Employment Equity Act, which is responsive to the employment discrimination practices faced the disabled people back then (McKinney and Swartz, 2021). Employment Equity Act encourages fair employment practices. It condemns the discrimination of people based on their race, gender, and disability. The presentation of disabled people in all sectors assist to adequately understand their special needs. It also assists to empower them and be part of decision making, governance, and think for others who are not in power or physical present in a particular sector, more special the service delivery sector.

Creation of conducive environments and promotion of technological use

Scholars such as Clifford (2020); Li and Shang (2020); Shaheen and Lohnes Watulak (2019), have raised their concerns about the lack of conducive environments to accommodate the disabled people in government offices. According to these scholars disabled people sometimes must travel long distances to access government offices, also lack of access ways or routes for their special needs etc. These circumstances are not good for the disabled people and limits them to participate adequately in service delivery, therefore this study recommends that in order for government to make service delivery more accessible to the disabled people conducive environments should be built and taken into account in their offices. Technology systems and equipment should also be promoted and used to promote accessibility of service delivery for the disabled people.
Data and research

Accurate data and research are always important to improve the decision making in all sectors. This also counts when it comes to disabled people in service delivery. There should be an accurate data on the total number of disabled people in South Africa and proper research on understanding their special needs and effective ways to assist them, more especial in relation to the service delivery. This will assist to ensure that service delivery is more accessible to disabled in South Africa, more is special in the local sphere of government as the closest sphere of government to the people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study finds out that disabled people are still facing some challenges in accessing different public goods and services provided by the government. These challenges include location and physical structure of offices, lack of government policies, discrimination, stigma, and negative thoughts associated with disability etc. Furthermore, these challenges impact negatively to daily lives of disabled people hence they feel excluded in the enjoyment of public goods and service.

The authors contend that the South African government has made considerable progress in providing inclusive public services, particularly to people with disabilities, but there are still many obstacles that people with disabilities experience when attempting to access public services. Therefore, it is recommended that is the government must take various actions to tackle this issue. Such actions include the monitoring and assessing policies that benefit persons with disabilities, as well as ensuring that public offices where residents normally go to get services are accessible to individuals with disabilities. Again, the government should encourage and invest in mobile government offices that are specifically intended to meet the requirements of people with disabilities.

Furthermore, government must ensure that in leadership structures, disabled people are empowered and employed so that they can give positive impact in the implementation of disability regulations and policies. These strategic actions are aiming at ensuring that disabled people are accessing government goods and services more and disabled people are part of state progress and development.

Acknowledgement

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Author Contributions: Abstract, X.T.; Introduction, X.T.; methodology, X.T.; Results, M.M.; Discussion, M.M.; Conclusion, X.T.; writing—review and editing, X.T.

Funding: This research was funded by not funded by any institutions or private person

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References


Publisher’s Note: SSBFNET stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations. © 2023 by the authors. Licensee SSBFNET, Istanbul, Turkey. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science (2147-4478) by SSBFNET is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.