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## People With Disabilities Lack Access To Information



*A child with disability in a wheel chair (Pic: Handicap)*

People living with disabilities (PLWDs) in Liberia fall at the lowest ebb of accessing public information and facilities, the President of the National Union of Organizations of the Disabled (NUOD) Rev. Fallah Boimah stated Wednesday (April 3) in Monrovia.

Mr. Boimah said information is not produced in formats for accessibility of PLWDs, while public buildings are not constructed disable friendly, and this was denying thousands of people living with disabilities access to information that could held change their lives.

Boima said because information are not presented in accessible

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**FLY Training 500 Youth**



# People With Disabilities

format like Braille (for the blind) and Signs (for the deaf and dumb), these people were more or less cut off from accessing and understanding valuable information for their own benefits.

Added to that, the NUOD boss noted that public buildings including churches, health facilities, schools and universities as well as government ministries and agencies, were not constructed with facilities to enable visually impaired (blind) and physically challenged (crippled) to access them.

"These are serious challenges we are facing, and we have said it over and over again," Boimah told an Informer's interview following his presentation at a three-day sensitization forum on making information accessible for all including persons with disabilities. The forum is a collaborative effort between Handicap International and Building Markets Liberia, with the aim of changing the negative perceptions of Liberians about PLWDs.



Handicap International is the disabled watch dog, and in Liberia the organization primarily supports people with a physical disability nationally for rehabilitation services and all people and families affected directly or indirectly by disability for activities designed to promote the rights of people with disabilities. On the other hand, Building Market, founded 2004, has a mission, among others, to build markets, create jobs and sustain peace in developing countries by championing local entrepreneurs and connecting them to new business opportunities.

In Liberia, an estimated 16% of the population of the 3.73 million inhabitants constitutes people with disabilities, according to the 2008 population census. People with disabilities are often discriminated and marginalized from the larger society, and are considered to be poor and deserve charity and care, organizers of the workshop said.

People with disabilities faced tough lives in Liberia with public facilities providing no opportunities for the betterment of their lives, and officials of Handicap and Building Markets said this is why they were partnering, with support from USAID Sustainable Marketplace Initiative Liberia (SMI-L), to host the awareness forum.

Being attended by members of government agencies, private companies and universities, among others, the forum closes today with several recommendations expected, but the NUOD President said government needs political will to ensure the welfare of handicapped people.

Boimah said there were lack of trained health workers and teachers to respond to the needs of people living with disabilities, and stressed the need for government to train people in sign language and other professionals who would understand people with disabilities.

“We need information in Braille and in sign language, and that is a challenge,” he said. “Another challenge is the lack of trained health workers. When a deaf goes to the hospital or clinic, information becomes so difficult; they are not able to explain themselves because the health workers are not trained in sign language.”

Speaking of the educational sectors, Boimah indicated that “there are no trained teachers in Braille and sign language. So this is a very big challenge to persons with disabilities. They are not able to access education and they are not able to get information.”

Of all the challenges, Boimah told the Informer that the “lack of political will be the government to provide information to persons with disabilities in accessible formats.”

Because visually impaired and wheelchair carriers are unable to access offices in public buildings to get information, Boimah recommended that government should begin to make adjustments on existing buildings and ensure that new ones are disabled friendly. “It should be a policy that every government building that will be coming up or buildings that are of public use contains ramps, and this will provide access to persons of disabilities to access information that are important to them,” he recommended.

He dismissed the notion that people with disabilities are “disabled” and are unable to do anything, arguing that those with disabilities could even do better than those who are able. “All we need is that we should just be given the support...and they will see what we can do.”

Ten topics are being presented, including SMI-L's “Sensitivity to Persons with Disabilities in Liberia” training module, which is normally presented to local business owners during Building Markets' general procurement training.

This module was developed last year in partnership with Handicap International to address a lack of sensitivity on the part of business owners toward those with disabilities. “Unpacking The Articles 2&21 of the UN convention on Persons with Disabilities,” “The Importance of Accessing Information,” “Overview of Building Markets Products and Services—Accessing Information on the Business Portal,” as well as “Challenges Faced in Accessing Information for Persons with Disabilities,” among others are being discussed.

Organizers said training government officials to think differently is just as important, as they are the members of society that can drive change to create a more inclusive society. Writes D Kaihennah Sengbeh, 0886586531, dakasen1978@yahoo.com