



**DISABLED PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATION (DPA) SINGAPORE
2022 CRPD PARALLEL REPORT**

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INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

The first Parallel Report by the Disabled People's Association Singapore (DPA) was submitted to the CRPD Committee in 2019. As it has been three years since the first 2019 Parallel Report, DPA is submitting this updated 2022 Parallel Report documenting the realities of people with disabilities in Singapore in the context of developments since 2019. As the first 2019 Parallel Report focused primarily on highlighting the realities and barriers persons with disabilities in Singapore face when accessing employment, the following updated 2022 Parallel Report shall also have a similar employment focus. While the following focuses on employment, it will also outline realities faced by disabled people in Singapore as it pertains to other areas of the CRPD – other areas that have a direct effect on building a disability-inclusive and disability-equitable workforce (SECTION 1). The following will also comment on recent events and developments over the last few years that raises important questions for ensuring Singapore's commitments to the CRPD (SECTION 2).

In the process of updating the report, conversations, interviews, and focus groups were conducted with persons with all types of disabilities¹ during the months of April – July of 2022. The anecdotes and accounts shared by persons with disabilities in the following updated 2022 Parallel Report, unless otherwise stated, are from such conversations, interviews, and focus groups. The recommendations made in this report have thus been raised and approved entirely by people with disabilities.

Additionally, DPA shared the report with representatives of several disability organisations in Singapore. Such organisations gave their feedback and comments, which DPA has taken into consideration when finalising the following report.

[*Note: due to the word limit requirement by the CRPD Committee, there are other important points of discussion that we could not fit into the following report.]

SECTION 1: THEMATIC AREAS AROUND EMPLOYMENT

EMPLOYMENT

The Singapore government has put into place several initiatives and plans to improve persons with disabilities' access to employment. The following section aims to outline several of such efforts since 2019, along with several of DPA's recommendations on how to improve, optimise, or build off such efforts in pursuance of Singapore's goal to realise the various provisions of the CRPD relating to employment.

What has been done:

SG Enable, an agency set up by the Government in 2013 to provide support to persons with disabilities, has implemented efforts in the last few years – such as conducting outreach to persons

¹ Persons with disabilities who contributed and participated in conversations that led to the content of this report included: autistic people, people with developmental disabilities, people with intellectual disabilities, people with learning disabilities, people with physical disabilities (including but not limited to wheelchair users, and people with chronic illnesses), people with psychosocial disabilities and various mental health conditions, and people with sensory disabilities (including but not limited to blind and deaf people).

with disabilities who stopped working during the pandemic and holding multiple virtual career fairs.² Additionally, SG Enable has made enhancements to its Open Door Programme (ODP) – a programme designed to provide assistance with job redesign, assistive technology purchases of equipment, workplace modification as well as recruitment and job placement services for persons with disabilities. In July 2020, SG Enable increased the amount covered under the ODP training grant to cover 95% of course fees (up from the previous 90% of coverage). SG Enable also has increased the training allowance from S\$4.50/hour to S\$6.00/hour and instituted a new training award of S\$100.³

In 2021, the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), as a means to encourage employers to hire more persons with disabilities, replaced its existing wage-offset scheme – the Special Employment Credit (SEC) which expired in December 2020 – with the Enabling Employment Credit – a government scheme that provides wage offsets of up to 20% of a disabled person’s salary (capped at \$400/month per disabled employee).⁴ This is a higher wage offset compared to the SEC.⁵ The government has recently also extended the Jobs Growth Incentive (JGI) scheme to March 2023 – a similar wage subsidy scheme that has particular provisions for particular eligible disabled employees.⁶

Additionally, in 2021, the government announced that it will be enshrining the Tripartite Alliance for Fair Employment Practices (TAFEP) guidelines into law.⁷ The TAFEP guidelines is a document outlining TAFEP’s recommendations to employers on conducting fair employment practices, and currently used by TAFEP to analyse claims of discriminatory and unfair workplace practices. There currently exists no specific laws in Singapore that directly regulate workplace discrimination, and thus such a law will be the first of its kind in Singapore.

The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) also announced in 2021 that it has plans to pilot Enabling Business Hubs (EBHs) – regional hubs that provide on-site job coach support to persons with disabilities and employers – with the first EBH expected to be operational in 2023.⁸ More recently, SG Enable in May 2022 launched the Enabling Academy – a new learning hub that aims to build capabilities to provide lifelong learning opportunities to persons with disabilities to develop their personal growth and personal development, to provide access to relevant resources for employers, disability employment professionals, caregivers, and volunteers, and to build collaborations with training providers towards disability-related training.⁹

² Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2020) “Impact of COVID-19 on Employment Prospects of Persons with Disabilities” (MSF.gov.sg) <<https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/Pages/Impact-of-COVID-19-on-Employment-Prospects-of-Persons-with-Disabilities-and-Measures-to-Raise-Inclusivity.aspx>>

³ Goh Yan Han. (2020) “Job Support for Persons with Disabilities to Continue Despite COVID-19 Pandemic” The Straits Times. <<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/manpower/job-support-for-persons-with-disabilities-to-continue-despite-covid-19-pandemic>>

⁴ Ministry of Manpower. (2021) “Fact Sheet on Enabling Employment Credit” (MOM.gov.sg) <<https://www.mom.gov.sg/-/media/mom/documents/budget2020/factsheet-enabling-employment-credit.pdf>>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore. (2022) “IRAS | Jobs Growth Incentive (JGI)”. IRAS.gov.sg. <<https://www.iras.gov.sg/schemes/disbursement-schemes/jobs-growth-incentive>>

⁷ Jalelah Abu Baker. (2021) “NDR2021: Singapore to Enshrine into Law Workplace Anti-Discrimination Guidelines” ChannelNewsAsia. <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/ndr-2021-anti-discrimination-law-tafep-pm-lee-2143101>>

⁸ Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2021) “New Initiatives to Enhance Support for Persons with Disabilities Throughout Their Lives” (MSF.gov.sg) <<https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/Pages/New-Initiatives-to-Enhance-Support-for-Persons-with-Disabilities-Throughout-Their-Lives.aspx#:~:text=MSF%20will%20explore%20the%20development,be%20operational%20from%202023%20onwards.>>

⁹ SG Enable. (2022) “Enabling Academy”. (SGEnable.sg) <<https://www.sgenable.sg/your-first-stop/training-consultancy/enabling-academy>>

Many of such initiatives and action steps by the government over the last few years are important and will lead to needed positive outcomes. DPA acknowledges the work that the Singapore government has put into developing such initiatives and action steps and would like to provide the following recommendations on how the government can optimise and build off such efforts in pursuance of Singapore's goal to realise the various provisions of the CRPD relating to employment.

Recommendations:

(1) Recommendations regarding government programmes and initiatives

(a) expand scope and awareness of government programmes and initiatives based on a definition of disability that is aligned with the social model of disability outlined in the CRPD

DPA first recommends that all government disability programmes and initiatives be based on a definition of disability that is based on the social model of disability outlined in the CRPD. The current Enabling Masterplan and SGEEnable definition of disability cite individual disabilities as the reason for persons with disabilities facing challenges in gaining access to employment.¹⁰ The social model of disability is clear that the barriers are caused by society being designed for those without disabilities and that we have collective responsibility to remove those barriers. Applied to the issue of employment, an updated and more inclusive definition of disability would allow more people to gain access to the comprehensive support schemes that are being offered. It may also better prepare employers to have a mindset of collective responsibility to remove barriers rather than seeing a person's disability as the cause of the barriers.

Related CRPD Article(s): 1

We also recommend that government programmes and initiatives be inclusive of the entire disability community. While programmes such as the ODP are comprehensive in its objectives, persons with psychosocial disabilities are ineligible to apply for the ODP. People with psychosocial disabilities experience very similar social and societal barriers compared to those experienced by persons with other disabilities - including but not limited to experiencing stigma and discrimination when accessing education, vocational training programmes, and employment, developing social and cultural capital, etc. People with psychosocial disabilities would thus greatly benefit from initiatives such as the ODP. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for persons from other disability groups to also have or acquire psychosocial disabilities. We thus recommend that psychosocial disabilities be included in Singapore's definition of disability and for programmes such as the ODP to employ such an inclusive definition – a step that would benefit not only persons with psychosocial disabilities, but the disability community as a whole.¹¹

Related CRPD Article(s): 1

Additionally, disabled job seekers have shared that it is not uncommon for employers to be unaware of government programmes and initiatives such as the ODP or the EEC. Further, amongst employers, misconceptions about how to make reasonable adjustments for persons with disabilities remain, which make it more difficult for persons with disabilities to be integrated into the labour market. For example, DPA has heard of the misconception that employees with disabilities are ineligible for insurance coverage during their term and that costs to accommodate them are high.

¹⁰ SGEEnable. (2022) "Information on Disability in Singapore" <<https://www.sgenable.sg/about-us/our-impact/disability-in-singapore#:~:text=According%20to%20Singapore's%20Enabling%20Masterplan,result%20of%20physical%2C%20sensory%20and>>

¹¹ The government does have programmes and support schemes to support persons with psychosocial disabilities; however, such initiatives are not as comprehensive or as financially incentivised as the ODP and neither are they as well known about. Moreover, our point behind this recommendation is that psychosocial disabilities should be included with other disabilities and not treated as something separate.

DPA acknowledges the potential of the Enabling Academy and the potential training opportunities it provides and hopes that the Enabling Academy can be used to boost promotion and awareness of such government programmes and initiatives.

Related CRPD Article(s): 8(2)

It is also important that any awareness raising and promotion of such government programmes and initiatives be conducted in a manner that promotes the need to respect the dignity of disabled persons and the need to remove barriers as outlined in the CRPD rather than any sense of charity or “good will”. Persons with disabilities have shared that they feel that many employment matching programmes run by social service agencies (SSAs) still view disabled persons as charity, and conduct their services as such. As one disabled woman who was let go from her job placement with no explanation shared:

“I think because the association [an SSA] thinks that it's good will. They just want to do charity. To them is doing charity, but to us I feel that we should not be charity because our time is there. We are doing the work. We are not going there to play.”

Persons with disabilities have also shared that they are concerned that inclusion of disabled people is based on how much financial subsidies a company receives and that they are concerned that their opportunities to employment will still depend on how much an employer will be willing to receive such subsidies rather than on their skill sets and qualifications. As one individual with disabilities who does not require expensive workplace modifications shared about his honest reflections on his experience with various job placements through SSAs:

“When companies get subsidies, they employ us, then when they don't have, they let us go. I feel they are just making use of us because they have subsidies, then they employ.”

There should be an awareness that while government schemes such as the EEC is at times a necessary and important means to start the process of employers hiring more disabled people, it should not be the only method nor should the utilisation rate of initiatives such as the EEC be the end measure of success for inclusive employment.

Related CRPD Article(s): 8(2)

(b) Improving the effectiveness of existing job-matching programmes.

DPA acknowledges the efforts and work by SG Enable and various SSAs assisting in job matching services. However, many disabled persons have shared that improvement is needed. Disabled job seekers and applicants have reported problems with the type and quality of support provided by agencies such as SG Enable and various SSAs.

For example, many disabled persons who have approached SG Enable and other SSAs felt that the job options offered or that they were matched with through SG Enable and other SSAs were overall limited or did not match their prior education, training, or experience. As one autistic individual shared about his experience with SGEnable:

“I felt that they were pushing jobs that career wise weren't suited. I study mathematics in university. They try to push things like design and stuff and I just felt that it was completely out of my stream. I mean, to say that even if I could get the job, I'm not able to deliver something fair to myself or the company or the organisation to hire me or for me to go there. I don't want to waste people's time. But then I felt very pressured by the person who they assigned to me, they kept on pushing me to, oh, you know, this job. So basically, in the end I just said, okay.”

Persons with disabilities also shared that many such placements were in occupations that were low-paying. Additionally, several persons with disabilities commented that the jobs they were matched with required them to perform tasks that were not possible given their disability, or that required them to utilise equipment and technology that were not accessible. Some even noted that the workplaces they were placed in through such SSAs were at times inaccessible, potentially unsafe, and had unethical work practices. As one disabled woman with difficulty in navigating stairs shared about her job placement experience through an SSA working at a restaurant:

“On my first day, I found that there were many steps, so I realised I couldn't work there as I didn't want to fall down while carrying the dishes. They [the restaurant] were supposed to pay me \$64, but they paid me \$56. I told myself "forget it, just take it and go". And then they [SSA] asked us to go to the hospital to work for \$800 per month. It's too low, because we take transport and then we have to find our way back.”

Persons with disabilities as a population in Singapore experience significant economic inequities. According to the MOM's Comprehensive Labour Force Survey (CLFS), while the employment rate of persons with disabilities has increased from 28.2% in 2018 – 2019 to 30.1% in 2020 – 2021, the unemployment rate still stands more than double that of persons without disabilities – at 11.3% to 5% respectively.¹² And amongst persons with disabilities who are employed, income inequities remain. According to the national census data in 2021, where disability-related data was included for the first time, persons with disabilities tend to be overrepresented in the lower income brackets and underrepresented in the higher income brackets.¹³ Specifically, persons with disabilities comprise 6.93% of the total resident employed population aged 15 years and older, but persons with disabilities comprise 12.03% of those who earn below \$2,000 and 7.95% of those who earn between \$2,000 and \$3,999.¹⁴ On the other hand, persons with disabilities comprise less than 5% of those who earn \$4,000 and above.¹⁵ In addition, a number of persons with disabilities in Singapore also currently work in sheltered workshops – facilities that are not considered part of “open employment”, and there is limited data about the earnings and salaries in such sheltered facilities.

Such data shows that inequities in income and opportunities still remain for persons with disabilities in Singapore. Thus, programmes and initiatives aiming to enhance the inclusion and wellbeing of disabled persons in employment and income attainment must be intentional to target the patterns and practices that drive such inequities.

DPA acknowledges that this will require enhancements in other sectors of society that are beyond the scope of SGenable and various SSAs. However, DPA believes that several steps can be taken by SGenable and SSAs to address such afore-mentioned concerns.

DPA would like to put forward the following recommendations:

- (i) Expand the scope of data collection regarding employment matching services and data relating to overall employment of persons with disabilities

As the body funding the ODP, the Government could consider using a more holistic evaluation mechanism to measure the effectiveness of SG Enable and SSAs in matching persons with

¹² Ministry of Manpower. (2021) “Infographic: Employment Outcome of Persons with Disability” (MOM.gov.sg) <<https://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Infographic-Employment-Outcomes-of-Persons-with-Disabilities-2020-2021.aspx>>

¹³ Department of Statistics. (2021) “Singapore Census of Population 2020, Statistical Release 2: Households, Geographic Distribution, Transport and Difficulty in Basic Activities” (Singstat.gov.sg) <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/publications/reference/cop2020/cop2020-sr2/census20_stat_release2>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

disabilities to jobs. Many SSAs currently report job matches in terms of number of persons with disabilities matched to jobs and employed, but it is unclear whether job applicants were successful in obtaining a long-term position, if the job placements are enough to support the disabled person's financial needs, if there is a high turnover rate, or how satisfied or unsatisfied persons with disabilities are with their placement, etc. DPA recommends that the government employ such measures as retention, income attainment, turn-over rates, and job satisfaction to evaluate the success of their various job-matching programmes.

Related CRPD Article(s): 31(2)

As many persons with disabilities are still working in sheltered workshops, the government should also publish regular data on such sheltered workshops to consistently review the sheltered workshop model. While there are good intentions behind such facilities, it should not be the focus. As a report from the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) notes: "Rather than promoting sheltered workshops, governments can serve their citizens with disabilities better by removing barriers towards their employment in the open labour market".¹⁶

Related CRPD Article(s): 27(1)(j)

(ii) Enhance client-centred approaches

As noted, persons with disabilities have shared that they feel the options and services available are limited and do not match their skillset, along with not being adequate to assist with helping them earn enough or assist in attending to their specific situations. For example, an individual with multiple disabilities including psychosocial and sensory disabilities shared his frustrations with his interactions with such services and how he has work experience but has been having difficulty finding a job that pays enough to help support his family.

"If I go to IMH,¹⁷ they tell me that they only have F&B for me. If I go to [SSA], they tell me 'I only have massage training for you'. I ask you, then who can help me? Who can I go to? SG Enable again? Social worker? No, also cannot – my wife is earning 2,000. Then how?"

DPA recommends that capabilities be strengthened to enhance client-centred approaches through such services.

Related CRPD Article(s): 27(1)(e)

(iii) Expand the types of work options available through SG Enable and other employment matching services offered through various SSAs including assisting persons with disabilities to thrive in the gig economy

In pursuance of (ii), there needs to be an expansion of the types of occupations offered through SG Enable and other SSAs. As noted, many of the jobs offered through such programmes currently are low or lower paying occupations – which diminishes the efficacy of any efforts to decrease the income disparities between disabled and non-disabled individuals.

As noted, DPA is heartened about the recent launch of the Enabling Academy and the upcoming EBHs, and recommends that such projects can be used to strengthen capabilities of SG Enable and SSAs to bring on board more diverse employers to better match the skills, access needs, and relevant situations of disabled job seekers.

¹⁶ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. (2016) Strengthening Employment Prospects for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific. UNESCAP.

<https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/SDD%20Disability%20Glance%202015_Final_0.pdf>

¹⁷ Institute of Mental Health (IMH).

Additionally, persons with disabilities have shared that they would like to have more supports to include assistance with thriving in the gig economy. Persons with disabilities have shared that they would like to pursue more self-employment options and rely more on free-lance work that matches their skills and interests.¹⁸ SG Enable, SSAs, and the Enabling Academy can develop its services to allow for more of such support.

Related CRPD Article(s): 27(1)(f)

(iv) Improve access to life-long learning

In pursuance of (iii), government programmes and initiatives aiming to build and enhance the skills of job seekers also need to be fully accessible to persons with disabilities. DPA commends the work of the government in the past few years in assisting training providers to convert lessons into online modules especially during the pandemic, and the work of the newly launched Enabling Academy that aims to develop accessible courses. However, persons with disabilities have shared with DPA that it is common to still encounter courses that contain materials that are inaccessible – whether through programmes such as SkillsFuture or the SG United Traineeship programme.¹⁹ ²⁰ Additionally, most if not all SkillsFuture Courses do not provide in-class access services such as sign language interpretation or speech to text interpretation. SkillsFuture credits are also not eligible to use on procuring access services [there is the Temasek Trust-CDC (TT-CDC) fund, but it is a limited one-year fund that expires in December 2022]. Persons with disabilities have also shared that they have encountered lecturers through such skills development courses who were not inclusive or accommodating. As one individual who is blind shared:

“Then they should have been more inclusive in the training as well. Things like they should include, you see the SkillsFuture are done without any consideration to include the blind. It's that I actually bulldozed my way through. And there are some friends who I encouraged to go, they were so disheartened because when they tried, the lecturer actually sometimes even ignore them ... There are blind friends that actually shared with me. They tried and then they realised they couldn't do it and the lecturer didn't even bother.”

While DPA acknowledges the work that SG Enable has put into assisting with converting courses into online modules, along with the current and future plans for the training courses that will be made available through the new Enabling Academy, such accounts show that ensuring accessibility and training of professionals for all life-long learning programmes needs to be much further mainstreamed. DPA thus recommends that protocols be in place for accessibility and inclusion training of lecturers to be embedded into all life-long training and skills development courses, along with all employment matching services, from the get-go (whether offered through disability-specific agencies and programmes such as SGEnable or the Enabling Academy or through courses offered to anyone from the general public such as through SkillsFuture).

Related CRPD Article(s): 9(2); 24(5); 27(1)(d)

¹⁸ Some examples include persons with disabilities sharing that they would like to have more accessible courses teaching or supporting them on how to build their own website and/or develop their own YouTube channel and/or other online platforms to promote their skills/services.

¹⁹ For example, persons with disabilities have shared that many of the images and graphics – including charts, diagrams, etc. - used in such courses have no image descriptions, which poses as a very significant barrier in courses that are reliant on such images.

²⁰ Reena Rajasvari. (2020) “FORUM: Pandemic Has Dealt Blow to People with Disabilities” The Straits Times. <<https://www.straitstimes.com/forum/forum-pandemic-has-dealt-blow-to-people-with-disabilities>>

(2) Recommendations regarding codifying TAFEP guidelines into law

As accounts above illustrate, attitudinal barriers are one of the leading hindrances to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in Singapore. Such attitudinal barriers often manifest themselves through discriminatory behaviours towards disabled persons. As will be elaborated on in the remaining sections, discrimination occurs in other areas of our society and thus tackling discrimination will require strong legislation and policy in other areas such as education, healthcare, transport, and other areas. However, tackling workplace discrimination is an important and vital first step and thus DPA commends the Singapore government for its plans to codify workplace anti-discrimination legislations. Having noted this, persons with disabilities have many deep concerns with the TAFEP guidelines and fear that enshrining the TAFEP guidelines into law will lead to an inadequate workplace anti-discrimination legislation.

The following highlights some of such concerns and our recommendations on ways to address them.

(a) Ensure any legislation contains a definition of disability that is inclusive of the entire disability population in Singapore and that is aligned with the social model of disability put forth in the CRPD.

There currently is no definition of disability outlined in the TAFEP guidelines. This raises concerns as this leaves ambiguity on the part of both employers and employees on how to proceed in cases where discrimination on the basis of disability may have occurred. DPA thus recommends that a definition of disability similar to that outlined in 1(a) of this section on employment be included for the purposes of clarity in such a legislation.

Related CRPD Article(s): 1

(b) Clearly define discrimination by ensuring that examples of best practices and errant behaviours relating to disability are interspersed throughout the guidelines and by ensuring that principles of accommodation and accessibility are included in the guidelines especially when defining key terms throughout the legislation

The TAFEP guidelines does well to cover the various stages of the employment cycle – from job advertisements, applications, and interviews, to grievance handling and performance management, to potential dismissals and retrenchments. However, the guidelines do not always state examples of best practices or errant behaviour as it pertains to eliminating discrimination based on disability.²¹

This also applies to important terminology that are repeated throughout the guidelines. Terms such as “fairly” and “objective” are used frequently throughout the guidelines to describe what to do and yet do not have a clear definition. From our studies on discrimination in the workplace, there is still the sense that employers view “fairness” to mean that if non-disabled employers do not receive accommodations, disabled employees should not receive accommodations. This is evident through the various case studies we have heard of employers still refusing accommodations to disabled persons at various stages of the employment cycle.

DPA thus recommends that the need to provide accommodations and accessibility at all the stages of employment be included in the guidelines as they are codified – especially when providing examples of best practices or in defining standards of fairness.

Related CRPD Article(s): 2; 4(1); 27(1)

Additionally, such a legislation needs to cover both direct and indirect discrimination. While some might argue that indirect discrimination is harder to detect, it is important for any anti-discrimination

²¹ For example, in the current guidelines, there is quite a thorough listing of examples of what to include and what to avoid in job advertisements; however, an example pertaining to disability is absent from the list in the current guidelines.

legislation to also prohibit indirect discrimination as indirect discrimination often leads to non-inclusive and unfair work environments.

Related CRPD Article(s): 2; 4(1); 27(1)

(c) Optimising the scope and effectiveness of the new Tribunal

A concern that DPA has heard from persons with disabilities about enshrining the TAFEP guidelines into law is the question of enforcement – namely how will such a law be enforced and if there will be safe channels to report instances of discrimination. Persons with disabilities have informed DPA that while looking for work, they frequently encounter employers who do not abide by the TAFEP guidelines.

In addition to reports DPA has heard of blatant forms of discrimination – i.e. employers explicitly noting that they will not hire a disabled applicant solely because of his or her disability without providing any explanation, there are other areas of the TAFEP guidelines where persons with disabilities have shared goes frequently ignored.

For example, to facilitate fair interview processes, the guidelines state: “Should questions which may be perceived as discriminatory be asked, the reasons for asking such information should be made known to the interviewee. This will help avoid the misunderstanding that discriminatory criteria will be used in the employment decision”.²² However, DPA has heard from disabled job seekers who shared that they have encountered employers who have spent most of the interview asking questions about their disability and did not explain why they focused much of the interview on such questions.

Similarly, the guidelines state: “Employers should not request for other personal details, for example photograph and national service [NS] liability, as these generally should not be considerations in assessing an applicant’s suitability. This personal information can be obtained at point of job offer. If there is a need for the information before the job offer, the job application form should state the reasons, which should be job-related”.²³ However, a number of males with invisible disabilities (i.e. autism) who were exempted from National Service due to their disability have shared that there were at times multiple instances when an application had questions about NS and/or the hiring manager during the interview enquired about their exemption from NS stated in their application – leaving such applicants to have to inevitably disclose their disabilities. Such individuals shared that the hiring managers in such instances often did not explain why they enquired about their exemption status from NS.

Persons with disabilities have commented that there is overall a lack of mechanisms to ensure that the TAFEP guidelines are abided. The following excerpt is from an individual who used to work in the HR sector, and she describes the lack of supports disabled people have to make their case in reporting incidents of discrimination.

“Having worked in the Human Resource (HR) department, Respondent 14 shared that HR staff would know how to discriminate, without being exposed, during the hiring process by exploiting loopholes in the TAFEP guidelines: “We can explain 101 things as to why we cannot hire you...I’ll just say you don’t fit the culture, [and] you can’t fine* me.” On those who acquired their disability while in employment,

²² TAFEP. Tripartite Guidelines On Fair Employment Practices. TAFEP.sg <<https://www.tal.sg/files/tripartite-guidelines.pdf>>

²³ Ibid.

she added, “There are no policies on how to help someone [with a disability] ...The policy is ‘Let’s get rid of them’... for both private and public companies.”²⁴

It is therefore natural for such persons with disabilities to have significant enquiries as to how the guidelines will be enforced. DPA notes that there will be a tribunal that will be established to monitor such claims under the new legislation, and would like to make the following recommendations:

(i) Optimise the types of claims and cases the new tribunal will be able to address

The Employment Claims Tribunal (ECT) currently handles salary-related and wrongful dismissal claims. In particular, as the following two case studies demonstrate, the abuse of well-intentioned government initiatives by employers should also be seriously addressed by the new tribunal.

Case 1: “The respondent’s company had retrofitted a toilet, using a government grant, to be wheelchair accessible. It broke down one day and repairs took longer than expected. He was told by the management that he would be on leave for the duration of the repairs, but discovered, to his dismay, that his salary had been deducted as he was deemed to have been on unpaid leave.”²⁵

Case 2: “A respondent recounted his experience with a job at a restaurant which was facilitated by a SSA providing employment matching and support services. The SSA had proposed paying an allowance of \$4 per hour and requested the restaurant to match that. But the boss of the restaurant offered to pay only his Central Provident Fund (CPF)¹⁰ and provide free meals”²⁶

DPA recommends that provisions be made for the new tribunal to be able to oversee such cases as well. Additionally, the new tribunal should be set up to handle cases pertaining to both direct and indirect discrimination in all stages of the employment cycle.

Related CRPD Article(s): 4(1)

(ii) Enable the new tribunal to have the authority to require employers to abide by the legislations

In addition to the need for clear and comprehensive definitions and provisions in such legislations, it is also important for the tribunal that will be overseeing the enforcement of such legislations to have the authority to require employers to abide by such legislations to ensure enforcement. Enforcement should be timely, consultative with persons with disabilities, and provide the necessary remedies required, along with measures to prevent repeat offences. Follow-ups with each case after resolution should also be included.

Related CRPD Article(s): 4(1)

(iii) Include provisions in the legislation to ensure channels of reporting are safe, confidential, and accessible

Persons with disabilities need to feel their anonymity can be protected and preserved during the reporting process. However, persons with disabilities have shared that many barriers currently exist to realising this necessity – including:

- Channels to report incidents of discrimination are often inaccessible – whether it be on websites that are not screen reader accessible, offices to deal with discrimination claims being located in parts of an office or building that is not wheelchair accessible, instructions on the

²⁴ Disabled People’s Association. (2018) Discrimination Faced by People with Disabilities at the Workplace. DPA. <<https://www.dpa.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Discrimination-Faced-by-People-with-Disabilities-at-the-Workplace-Study-1.pdf>>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

reporting process not made available in easy-read plain text formats, etc – making reporting either unfairly arduous or impossible for disabled persons to report in ways that will protect their anonymity

- Due to barriers in accessing employment, it is not uncommon for disabled people to be one of the only disabled persons if not the only disabled person in their company/organisation, and thus even if channels of reporting are accessible, the anonymity of disabled persons in such a scenario will still be undermined if he or she chooses to report an incident of disability-related discrimination.

DPA recommends that the need to ensure accessibility of reporting channels (while still protecting the anonymity of the disabled person) is part of the new legislation and that there be enforcement mechanisms in place to ensure such accessibility. The new tribunal can consider performing reviews of a company's/organisation's policies regarding other demographics as well if the disabled person filing a report is the only disabled person in his or her company/organisation.

Related CRPD Article(s): 4(1); 5(2), (3); 9; 13(1), 27(1)

Additionally, as the government often encourages internal mediation between employer and employee before the case is brought to any other tribunals, there should be provisions in the law to ensure that such internal mediation processes are accessible and inclusive while protecting the disabled person's anonymity.

Related CRPD Article(s): 4(1); 5(2), (3); 9; 13(1), 27(1)

(iv) Require training of members in the new tribunal to conduct their work with the understanding of Singapore's obligations under the CRPD

To ensure that such efforts will lead to the desired outcomes of Singapore's ratification of the CRPD, DPA recommends that members overseeing cases brought to the new tribunal be trained in Singapore's obligations to disability inclusion as outlined in the CRPD.

Related CRPD Article(s): 4(1)(i); 8(2)(d); 13(2)

EDUCATION

As noted in the beginning of the report, achieving inclusion in employment will also require ensuring inclusion in other areas of society. One such area is education. An inclusive work environment is built upon an education system which promotes, from a young age, integration and respect, rather than segregation and marginalisation. Such an education system must not disadvantage students with disabilities in comparison with their peers and must extend the accessibility of education programs to all persons with disabilities.

The government has taken important steps towards this goal. As of 2020, 80% of students with disabilities are studying in mainstream schools, with important support in the last several years to accommodate such students.²⁷

However, there is much needed room for improvement. In Singapore, children who are assessed as having mild-to-moderate disabilities may be admitted to mainstream schools, whereas those with moderate-to-severe disabilities may still remain segregated in Special Education (SPED) schools. Unlike mainstream schools, SPED schools are not under the sole purview of the Ministry of Education

²⁷ Jolene Ang. (2020) "Parliament: Students with special education needs to get more help and teaching support" The Straits Times. <<https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/parliament-students-with-special-education-needs-to-get-more-help-and-teaching-support>>

(MOE). Instead, they are funded and overseen by both MOE and various SSAs that come under the MSF. Yet, Article 24 refers to free access to the general education system and not a segregated one.

DPA thus recommends the following to build off the work the government has done so far:

(1) Enhancing accessibility and disability-inclusion capabilities of all levels of mainstream schools with the purposes of optimal integration

(a) Implementing a more robust framework for Allied Educators (AEDs) in mainstream schools in terms of manpower, job scope, salary, skills training, and overall professional development.

AEDs play an important role in providing learning and behavioural support (LBS) to students with disabilities in mainstream schools. The government has worked to increase the number of AEDs in mainstream schools – efforts that witnessed a 40% increase in AEDs from 2016 – 2020.²⁸ However, students with disabilities, parents, and teachers have shared that the current baseline of 2 AEDs per primary school and 1 AED per secondary school in 95% of secondary schools is still insufficient to provide adequate support.^{29 30} DPA recommends that the government builds off their efforts by increasing such baselines. While the government has also taken important steps to expand career progression for AEDs, such efforts need to take into account improving training as reports show that training received is still inadequate to manage actual cases.³¹

Related CRPD Article(s): 24(2)(d), (e), (4)

(b) Mainstream accessibility in mainstream schools

(i) Optimise efforts to mainstream accessibility of physical infrastructure in mainstream schools

As of 2021, 64 primary schools, 34 secondary schools, and 4 junior colleges and centralised institutes have full-barrier free accessibilities for people with physical disabilities.³² DPA acknowledges the government's continued commitments in this regard, but would also encourage efforts to be increase as such numbers, while an improvement, equate to approximately 35% of primary schools, 25% of secondary schools, and 36% of junior colleges and centralised institutes having full barrier-free accessibilities – meaning that a significant majority of mainstream schools do not have the needed accessibility standards for students with physical disabilities – limiting opportunities for such students.³³

Related CRPD Article(s): 9(1)(a); 24(2)(c)

²⁸ Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2022) "Schooling Years (Ages 7-18)" (MSF.gov.sg) <<https://www.msf.gov.sg/policies/Disabilities-and-Special-Needs/Enabling-Masterplans/Pages/Schooling-Years-Ages-7-18.aspx>>

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Autism Enabling Masterplan. Autism Enabling MasterPlan (AEM) report, under "High Priority Area A - Quality Assurance for Autism Services" < <https://enablingmasterplan.autism.org.sg/>>

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ministry of Education. (2021) "Support for students with Physical Disabilities" (MOE.gov.sg) <[³³ Percentages are based on calculations by dividing the number of full barrier-free primary schools, secondary schools, and junior colleges/centralized institutes with the total number of primary schools, secondary schools, and junior colleges/centralized institutes in Singapore.](https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/parliamentary-replies/20210104-support-for-students-with-physical-disabilities#:~:text=There%20are%20currently%2064%20primary,for%20students%20with%20physical%20disabilities.>³²</p></div><div data-bbox=)

(ii) expand access to resources, accessibilities, and assistive technology for students with sensory disabilities in mainstream schools

There currently exists only seven mainstream schools in Singapore (both primary and secondary) that provide resourced teachers who are trained to support students with sensory disabilities.³⁴ To support the mainstreaming of such services, DPA recommends that more of such resources be embedded in other mainstream schools. Additionally, DPA recommends that a more national approach be taken – for instance, working towards making Singapore sign language (SGSL) an official language in Singapore as a first step to legitimising the language and working towards improving language access for deaf students. DPA also recommends that there should be more opportunities for non-disabled students to take classes in SGSL in mainstream schools for better communication between deaf and hearing peers for a more inclusive schooling environment, which will also increase the availability of such accessibilities.

Related CRPD Article(s): 21(c), (e); 24(2), (3)

(c) Cultivate an inclusive and holistic view of disability in students that is aligned with the social model of disability

(i) Align disability-related civic education with the social model of disability

The government currently incorporates disability awareness in civics education through Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) curriculum that all students in mainstream schools have to take. However, DPA is concerned that such disability awareness education is not aligned (and at times even contradictory) with the social model of disability. In a recent statement, MOE noted that: “In primary schools, students learn to have empathy for others, and are taught to respect and relate to those who are differently abled whether they are in their own class or in the wider community. In secondary schools, students learn about persons with disabilities or special educational needs who have overcome their personal challenges, and that everyone can contribute to society.”³⁵

In addition to the outdated phrasing of “differently-abled”, it is concerning that in secondary schools, students are taught that disabled people have to “overcome their personal challenges”. This is far from the social model that notes that it is society that has to remove barriers.

Related CRPD Article(s): 2

In addition to aligning such material closer to the social model, DPA also recommends similar steps be taken for other portrayals of disability and persons with disabilities in other areas of class content.

Related CRPD Article(s): 8(2)(b)

(ii) Take more active steps to clamp down on bullying

Disabled students are more likely to experience bullying compared to non-disabled students.³⁶ Persons with disabilities have shared that the bullying and harassment they received as a child due to their disability greatly affected their ability to perform well in their studies and that such bullying and harassment they received as a child due to their disability have had long-lasting impacts on their

³⁴ Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2022) “Schooling Years (Ages 7-18)”

³⁵ Ministry of Education. “Strengthening Disability Awareness and Understanding Requires Whole-Of-Society Approach” (MOE.gov.sg) < <https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/forum-letter-replies/20220211-strengthening-disability-awareness-and-understanding-requires-whole-of-society-approach> >

³⁶ United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation. (2021) “Bullying Rates Higher for Children with Disabilities” (UNESCO) < <https://en.unesco.org/news/bullying-rates-higher-children-disabilities> >

mental health well into adulthood. DPA recommends that schools need to take more of a zero-tolerance policy on all forms of bullying.

Related CRPD Article(s): 7(1)

(d) Ensure disability inclusion at all stages of the education process

DPA thus recommends that accessibility and disability inclusion is embedded in all stages of the mainstream education process. For example:

(i) Pre-school: Increase the subsidies for Early Intervention Programme for Infants and Children (EIPIC)

The government has taken important steps towards this in the last few years including rolling out new programmes (e.g. “EIPIC Under-2s” and “Developmental Support Plus”) and increasing subsidies, reducing the fees for Singapore citizens from S\$5-S\$780 to S\$5-S\$430.³⁷ However, parents and caregivers have noted that fees are still expensive.³⁸ The government can implement measures to expand subsidies even further.

Related CRPD Article(s): 24(2)

(ii) Mainstream accommodations: Remove the annotation made in educational certificates for students given accommodation(s) in national examinations.

Accommodations should be mainstreamed throughout the education cycle and be treated as a disabled student’s access need. There thus is no reason to annotate such accommodations in education certificates. Currently, annotations of such accommodations are made on the certificate showing the results of the examination as well as the accommodations provided. Given the current state of lack of inclusion in the workforce, these annotations might serve to indirectly incite prejudice when these students seek employment later in life.

Related CRPD Article(s): 24(2)(c)

(iii) Optimise access to internships

Internships are key to a student’s development near the end of their secondary or tertiary education. The government has taken steps to implement programmes to widen the opportunities for students with disabilities seeking internship experience. However, more can be done to ensure students with disabilities have access to internships on the levels of their non-disabled peers. This can include ensuring access to internships are also covered under the upcoming codification of TAFEP guidelines.

Related CRPD Article(s): 4(1); 24(5)

(iv) Strengthen supports in tertiary education and institutes of higher learning (IHL)

Students with disabilities in tertiary education have shared that there remains much need for room for improvement especially in support services in such IHLs. For example, disabled students have shared that there currently exists no independent mediators with cross-functional purview in IHLs to deal with staff-student or student-students discrimination disputes based on an understanding of discrimination as defined through the social model of disability. Students with disabilities have also shared that many departments in IHLs tend to be siloed – leading to poor coordination to support disabled students.

³⁷ Cynthia Choo. (2019) “More Affordable, Targeted Early Intervention Programmes for Children with Developmental Needs” TODAYOnline. < <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/more-affordable-targeted-early-intervention-programmes-children-developmental-needs>>

³⁸ Autism Enabling Masterplan. Autism Enabling MasterPlan (AEM) report, under “High Priority Area A - Quality Assurance for Autism Services”

DPA has also heard reports of challenges with the Special Education Needs (SEN) fund-related administrations. DPA has heard reports of students with disabilities not being able to get access services in time when their semester starts – at times resulting in such students only being able to start a few weeks after or in some cases not even after a term. While this is due to IHL internal processes, there should be more enhanced quality assurance audits by the MOE higher education policy division to ensure such students are not left behind in these cases.

DPA recommends that such points shared by disabled students be incorporated in efforts to strengthen IHL supports.

Related CRPD Article(s): 24(5)

(2) Enhancing current SPED school programming

While the government aims towards optimal integration, it is important that students and families who require the services of SPED schools are not faced with unfair barriers and disparities.

There are currently several disparities between mainstream education and SPED schools. In addition to having long waiting lists, SPED school fees are generally more expensive than their mainstream counterparts'.³⁹ Furthermore, the opportunities for children in SPED schools to interact with children in mainstream schools are still limited.

DPA recommends:

(a) Provide a full subsidy to families with children in SPED schools so that such families pay the same fees as families with children in mainstream schools

SPED school fees can still cost almost 20 times the cost of mainstream school fees.⁴⁰ Low-income families can apply for these fees to be waived but the fee disparity is unfair to families who are ineligible for financial aid.⁴¹ If a full subsidy is not possible, DPA recommends that the income threshold eligibility be increased so that more families in the middle and lower income groups will qualify.

Related CRPD Article(s): 24(2)(b)

(b) Enable more opportunities for students from mainstream and SPED schools to interact, work, and play together

The government has taken steps towards this regard through satellite partnerships. Such partnerships are important, and the government can look into increasing the quantity and quality of such interactions. While several of such partnerships include regular or even daily interaction, it is not the case for all partnerships. The gap between the two cohorts is widened without the daily ability to learn and play together, resulting in a lack of awareness, understanding, acceptance, accommodation, and adaptation of persons with disabilities in everyday social contexts. Bringing SPED schools under the sole purview of MOE is one potential means to enhance interaction between students from mainstream and SPED schools.

Related CRPD Article(s): 7, 8(2)(b); 24(1)

³⁹ Ng Say Chong. (2022) "FORUM: Special Education School Fees Should Be the Same as in Mainstream Schools" The Straits Times. < <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/forum/forum-special-education-school-fees-should-be-the-same-as-in-mainstream-schools>>

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

HEALTHCARE

Access or lack of access to healthcare affects one's ability to find work. In pursuance of optimising employment prospects for persons with disabilities, it is important that equitable access to healthcare be present as well.

The government has taken important steps in this regard – particularly with its efforts with MediShield Life and CareShield Life. However, DPA would like to put forth the following recommendations to enhance equitable access and inclusion to and through healthcare for persons with disabilities.

(1) Addressing disability-discrimination by private insurance companies

The topic of disability-based discrimination by private insurance companies is a topic that has come up in the last several years – with reports from persons with disabilities – specifically autistic individuals - accounting the discriminatory barriers they face in attaining coverage from private insurance companies – with many such companies applying blanket, outdated, and at times irrelevant criteria to assess autistic individuals' eligibility for insurance schemes.⁴²

The government has taken steps to look into the matter – even noting that it has plans to remove its reservation on Article 25(e). However, DPA would like to recommend the following:

(a) Implement guidelines on disability discrimination for insurers in consultation with persons with disabilities and their representative organisations by the second half of 2022 and subsequently remove its reservations on Article 25(e)

In a recent parliamentary reply, the Government stated that it did not find unfair underwriting practices in individual cases that were highlighted to the Monetary Authority of Singapore. However, it is not clear whether the Government's definition of fairness is in compliance with the CRPD's definition of discrimination. For example, an autistic advocate has highlighted that autistic persons like himself have experienced discrimination on the basis of their neurodivergence, including outright rejections or, at best, additional loading fees and over-reaching exclusions, such as exclusions on the total permanent disability coverage under the Dependents' Protection Scheme.⁴³

Related CRPD Article(s): 2; 25(e)

The government has stated that it plans to remove its reservation on Article 25(e) after implementing fair insurance guidelines. The Government should consult with persons with disabilities and their representative organisations to implement such guidelines based on the CRPD's definition of discrimination. In particular, the guidelines should require insurers to disclose their risk assessment methodology and the relevant data relied on to justify any differential treatment of persons with disabilities. We recommend that in conjunction with such efforts, the government should follow through with their plans to remove its reservation on Article 25(e).

Related CRPD Article(s): 4(3); 25(e); 33(3)

⁴² Wesley Loh. (2020) "FORUM: Govt help needed to tackle insurer bias against autism" The straits Times. <<https://www.straitstimes.com/forum/forum-govt-help-needed-to-tackle-insurer-bias-against-autism>>

⁴³ Ibid.

(b) Enshrine the guidelines on disability discrimination for insurers in law in accordance with Article 25(e)

Article 25(e) obliges the Government to prohibit disability discrimination in the provision of health and life insurance. While the proposed guidelines are a positive step to provide guidance to insurers, the Government should work towards enshrining the guidelines in law so that disability discrimination is prohibited as a matter of law. Insurers found to have discriminated against persons with disabilities in the provision of health and life insurance should be subject to statutory penalties and provide redress victims of such discrimination.

Related CRPD Article(s): 2; 4(1); 25(e)

(2) Aligning approach to mental health and psychosocial disabilities with the social model of disability outlined in the CRPD

In addition to our recommendations to include psychosocial disabilities in the government's definition of disability used in its various programmes and initiatives, DPA recommends that the government aligns its various efforts around mental health with the approach outlined in the CRPD. DPA thus recommends that the government remove its reservation on Article 12(4) and subsequently make the necessary amendments to Singapore's Mental Health (Care and Treatment) Act to facilitate such alignments.⁴⁴

Related CRPD Article(s): 1; 12(4)

OTHER AREAS

In addition to sectors such as education and healthcare, DPA would like to put forth the following recommendations related to other areas of society that affects not only persons with disabilities opportunities in accessing employment but also in proper inclusion in Singapore society.

(1) Enhancing social protection programmes and initiatives

DPA commends the Government for the financial assistance that it provides to persons with and without disabilities who lack steady incomes and have little to no financial support – such as through Comcare and other initiatives.⁴⁵

Additionally, DPA commends the government for various support schemes specifically for persons with disabilities, and for recent enhancements to such schemes.⁴⁶ For example, DPA commends the government for providing the Taxi Subsidy Scheme (TSS) for persons with disabilities who are unable to travel via public transport. The TSS provides subsidies up to 80% of taxi fares.

⁴⁴ United Nations Human Rights Council. (2022) "Summary of the outcome of the consultation on ways to harmonize laws, policies and practices relating to mental health with the norms of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and on how to implement them" OHCHR.

<<https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FHRC%2F49%2F29&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>>

⁴⁵ Comcare is an assistance programme for low-income families and individuals. The Comcare Short-to-Medium Term Assistance includes a monthly cash grant, rental, utilities and transport vouchers, medical subsidies, and employment assistance. The Comcare Long Term Assistance fully subsidizes medical treatment in addition to the above.

⁴⁶ Yong Li Xuan. (2022) "Transport Subsidy Scheme for People with Disabilities to be Enhanced". The Straits Times. <<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/community/transport-subsidy-scheme-for-people-with-disabilites-to-be-enhanced>>

However, the TSS, while providing needed assistance, is an example of the common gaps that still are present in many such schemes. Firstly, to qualify, persons with disabilities have to be from families that earn a monthly per-capita household income of S\$2,800 or below.⁴⁷ Many persons with disabilities who require such services are from families that while earning above the monthly S\$2,800, may either still not earn enough to afford the costs and/or may be unable to attain support or assistance from their family members for a wide variety of reasons. Additionally, the TSS is only available for persons with disabilities who are medically certified to be “totally dependent on taxis for travel”.⁴⁸ There are still routes that are not barrier free in Singapore, along with many areas in Singapore that are frequently under construction causing additional accessibility barriers. This means that even persons with disabilities who are able to take public transport often have no choice but to rely on taxi services. However, such individuals usually are not eligible for the TSS. Moreover, the subsidies through the TSS may only be used for travel relating to school, work, and/or activities pertaining to SGenable programmes⁴⁹ – meaning that those who are eligible will still be unable to attain cost-effective access to other important amenities through the TSS.

DPA thus recommends that in addition to raising the income threshold, the government should avoid family-based means testing and expand the eligibility requirements for persons with disabilities who may need to access other amenities other than school, work, or SGenable-related programmes. DPA also recommends that similar enhancements be adopted for other support schemes – (whether disability-specific or for the general public) – such as MediShield Life and other insurance supports that still comprise various family-based means testing.

Related CRPD Article(s): 20(a); 25(a); 28

(2) Enhancing access to information

It is important that persons with disabilities are able to attain, impart information and communicate equitably compared to persons without disabilities. To this end, DPA recommends the following:

(a) Ensure private entities/companies that provide services to the general public do so through inclusive means and through accessible formats

Many people in Singapore rely on services run by private companies everyday – whether it be related to their day-to-day work, education, healthcare, transport, or daily living amenities. However, in Singapore, there is no law mandating that such services have to be accessible to persons with disabilities, and as a result, many such services run by private companies are not accessible. This is a significant inequity as persons with disabilities are often the ones who are most in need of availability and ease of access to services and yet due to a lack of regulation on accessibility, persons with disabilities often face the most barriers in accessing such services. For example, persons with disabilities are a population that tends to rely on food delivery services; however, persons with disabilities have shared that many food delivery mobile apps and websites are not accessible (i.e. not screen reader friendly) – leaving very few food delivery options to persons with disabilities who are full-time screen reader users.

Related CRPD Article(s): 9(2)(b); 21(c), (d)

⁴⁷ Enabling Guide. “Taxi Subsidy Scheme” (EnablingGuide.sg) < <https://www.enablingguide.sg/im-looking-for-disability-support/transport/taxi-subsidy-scheme>>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

(b) Implement measures to mainstream accessibility features and formats

DPA recommends that strong measures be taken to increase the availability of access professionals. For example, the government can invest more in expanding the availability of SGSL interpreters and increasing the availability of speech-to-text technologies.

This is especially important in medical settings such as hospitals and clinics. DPA recommends that there should be qualified interpreters for public essential services like medical settings. These costs should be covered by hospitals. Currently deaf people are still paying their own, or simply going without access to information at medical settings.

Related CRPD Article(s): 9(2); 21(c), (e)

Other steps to improve mainstreaming accessibility can include increasing the availability of braille and plain language formats.

Related CRPD Article(s): 21

(3) Optimising physical accessibility and use of mobility aids – including the use of guide and assistance dogs

DPA commends the government for the work in improving accessibility and the financial support it has provided for mobility aids. However, there still remains a lack of awareness about such aids and thus a diminishing of the potential of such aids. For example, there is still a lot of misunderstanding and frequent discrimination of the use of guide dogs in Singapore. While current legislation permits the use of guide dogs in almost all public spaces, it is still common for guide dogs and their handlers to be rejected from entering many public spaces – with guide dogs and their handlers being rejected approximately 50% of the time from using private hire vehicles.⁵⁰ DPA recommends that not only more training and awareness be required, but that the legislation pertaining to guide dogs be enhanced to (i) have more enforcement mechanisms to address and prohibit such discriminations and (2) expand laws such as the Environmental Public Health Act and Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) System Regulations to enable access for other assistance dogs for persons of other disabilities other than the blind.

Related CRPD Article(s): 4(1); 9(2); 20

(4) Enhancing political participation of persons with disabilities

There have been improvements in this regard over the last few years. However, there remains room for improvement and DPA would like to put forth the following recommendations:

(a) Remove Singapore's reservation on article 29(a)(iii)

While we acknowledge the important work by the government to support voters with disabilities, DPA recommends that the government remove its reservation on 29(a)(iii). The reasons provided by the government on its reservations on 29(a)(iii) does not take into account that some persons with disabilities may require to have someone they know and trust to help them vote. This concern has been voiced by allies and autistic people. Additionally, election officials may not have the necessary skills to communicate with or provide assistance to certain groups of disabilities such as those with multiple disabilities (for example, the Deaf-Blind). This may result in persons with disabilities being less likely to vote or being left out of the voting process altogether.

Related CRPD Article(s): 29(a)(3)

⁵⁰ Guide Dogs Singapore. (2021) <<https://www.facebook.com/GuideDogsSingapore/posts/3318360581599684>>

(b) Ensure accessibility of the entire political participation process

DPA recommends that accessibility be in place for the entire duration of the electoral process – including at rallies, the dissemination of campaign materials, etc. There should be regulations to ensure basic standards of accessibility while ensuring that smaller political parties do not face disparities in implementing such accessibilities.⁵¹

Related CRPD Article(s) 29(a)(i)

(5) Ensuring intersectionality in disability inclusion

Persons with disabilities include individuals from other historically-marginalised populations. DPA thus recommends that policies and plans include steps to address the unique realities faced by disabled persons from other historically-marginalised populations. For example:

(a) Women with disabilities

The government recently launched a whitepaper on “women’s development”.⁵² While it contains a few mentions of disability, there was much more that could have been included to address the unique realities of women with disabilities. For example, there was a section in the whitepaper about increasing mentorship opportunities for women in the workforce but there was no mention of ensuring accessibility in such opportunities. There was a chapter in the whitepaper on addressing domestic violence, but did not make mention of how globally women with disabilities are approximately 3 times more likely to be the victims of rape and approximately twice as likely to be the victims of domestic and gender-based violence compared to their non-disabled counterparts.⁵³ There was also little to no mention about the unique barriers faced by women with disabilities in attaining assistance in the case of domestic violence. There was some mention of the need to diversify the means of reporting, but no mention as to how such diverse means will be accessible to women with disabilities. DPA recommends that such realities and others be included in any policies to improve gender equality in Singapore.

Related CRPD Article(s): 6; 13(2); 16

In addition, DPA has heard reports of the unique barriers that mothers with intellectual disabilities face in attaining support. It has been alleged that it is common practice for children to be removed from mothers with intellectual disabilities, and indeed also from mothers with other various disabilities. There seems to be a deep lack of resources for such mothers, and often mothers with intellectual disabilities are fearful of disclosing their disability or pregnancy lest they are subject to losing custody of their children. DPA thus recommends that significant efforts be put in place to alter the practice of child removal and that supports be in place for such mothers.

Related CRPD Article(s): 6; 23(1)(b)

⁵¹ In Singapore, political parties have to fund raise their total expenses. Given that Singapore has one of the shortest election seasons, DPA recommends that some levels of technical assistance and costs be afforded to all political parties so as to not create disparities between political parties in their outreach to disabled voters.

⁵² Navene Elangovan. (2022) “Govt puts up White Paper to tackle wide-ranging issues on women’s development in Singapore” TODAYOnline. <<https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/government-white-paper-womens-development-1851221>>

⁵³ UN Women. (2017) “UN Women, Fact Sheet: Ending Violence Against Women and Girls with Disabilities” UN Women. <<https://untf.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2017/08/ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-with-disabilities>>

(b) Non-citizens with disabilities

Singapore is a country with a large non-citizen population – comprising more than a quarter of the population of Singapore (26.9%) – totalling 1.47 million people who are non-citizens in Singapore.⁵⁴ Despite comprising such a significant portion of the Singapore population, non-citizens are ineligible to participate in many of the government’s programmes, initiatives, and support schemes. DPA thus recommends that such afore-mentioned programmes, initiatives, and support schemes, along with the accompanying recommendations, especially pertaining to employment, education, healthcare, and transport, be progressively extended to non-citizens in Singapore with or who acquire disabilities. While the government has implemented specific schemes for non-citizens who have or acquire disabilities - such as the Work Injury Compensation Act (WICA) for migrant workers – advocates have noted gaps in such initiatives.⁵⁵

Related CRPD Article(s): 4(1), (5); 18

SECTION 2: RECENT EVENTS

THE ONSET OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant changes to Singapore in the last few years. The following section outlines several of such changes and its effects on persons with disabilities in Singapore, along with DPA’s recommendations on the action steps needed going forward.

(1) Ensuring accessibility of physical infrastructure in times of disruption

While protocols during the pandemic such as safe entry checkpoints and the frequent opening and closing of entrances and exits to public spaces were completely necessary and important, the roll-out and set-up of such protocols were not conducted with accessibility in consideration – causing many accessibility barriers for persons with disabilities. For example, blind individuals and wheelchair users have had to face unfamiliar and often inaccessible new routes due to the frequent opening and closing of entrances, people with mobility disabilities and people with dwarfism have had issues scanning QR codes due to codes being placed at inaccessible areas at entrances, deaf people not receiving important information about changes to such measures in public spaces due to such information only being relayed through audio announcements. There are many parts of Singapore that were already not accessible prior to the pandemic and persons with disabilities have shared that such additional accessibility barriers during the pandemic added significant stress and lack of access to amenities.

While Singapore currently has lifted safe entry checkpoints, such accessibility barriers in the last two years is cause for concern and highlights the lack of protocol in Singapore to ensure accessibility in the midst of times of disruption such as the pandemic.

⁵⁴ Population.gov. (2021) “Population in Brief 2021” (Population.gov.sg) <<https://www.population.gov.sg/files/media-centre/publications/population-in-brief-2021.pdf>>

⁵⁵ Humanitarian Organisation for Migrant Economics (HOME). (2022) “Statement on Work Injury Compensation Act (WICA)” HOME.org.sg <<https://www.home.org.sg/statements/2022/7/4/satement-on-work-injury-compensation-act-wica>>

DPA recommends:

(a) Ensure that accessibility is incorporated in all protocols during times of disruptions such as during public health management and other crises

DPA has commented about this during the pandemic, and we recommend that such considerations be part of protocol from the get-go.⁵⁶ The means to attain information about accessibility in the midst of such crises should also be mainstreamed and easily accessible.⁵⁷

Related CRPD Article(s): 9; 11

(b) Extend such measures to include times of disruption during periods of non-crises

Prior to the pandemic, additional inaccessibility caused by disruptions such as construction projects were frequent. DPA has commented about this, and we recommend that such considerations be part of protocol from the get-go.⁵⁸ It is important that there be protocols in place to ensure that such construction projects are required to set up alternative accessible routes to be maintained throughout the duration of the construction project.

Related CRPD Article(s): 9

(2) Approaching efforts to implement recommendations in SECTION 1 with the understanding of potential new COVID-19 case surges and/or other potential future crises

Prior to the pandemic, persons with disabilities already faced significant disparities in areas such as employment, education, healthcare, etc. However, such disparities widened during the pandemic.

For example, the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic resulting in some of the most job losses include sectors such as F&B and accommodation services – sectors where working persons with disabilities were over-represented in.⁵⁹ Additionally, persons with disabilities who were able to maintain their jobs were financially hit hard as well. For instance, many persons with disabilities shared that their work in such sectors are based on hourly rate contracts and that they witnessed their work hours drastically cut during the pandemic.

As noted in SECTION 1, the work of the government in the last few years to assist the employment situation of persons with disabilities should be acknowledged; however, such examples highlight the need to expand the range of occupations and increase the accessibility of the labour market outlined in our recommendations in the “EMPLOYMENT” sub-section in SECTION 1.

Related CRPD Article(s): 27

⁵⁶ Justin Ong. (2020) “S'pore's changing urban design an 'added barrier' for those with disabilities?” The Straits Times. <<https://www.sutd.edu.sg/About-Us/News-and-Events/News/2020/11/changing-urban-design-an-added-barrier>>; Akshita Nanda (2021) “Don't sideline access amid pandemic” The Straits Times. <<https://www.sutd.edu.sg/About/happenings/News/2021/9/Dont-sideline-access-amid-pandemic>>; Wong Shiyong. (2021) “Which seats are marked for safe distancing? Covid-19 challenges the visually impaired in S'pore face” The Straits Times. <<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/community/navigating-virus-measures-a-challenge-for-those-with-visual-impairment>>

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Richard Chien-Ming Kuppasamy. (2022) “Singapore's recovery from the pandemic presents untapped opportunities for disability inclusion” TODAYOnline. <<https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/singapores-recovery-pandemic-presents-untapped-opportunities-disability-inclusion-1884351>>

⁵⁹ Department of Statistics. (2021) “Singapore Census of Population 2020, Statistical Release 2: Households, Geographic Distribution, Transport and Difficulty in Basic Activities”

Additionally, the pandemic underscores the need to ensure much of the various accessibility recommendations outlined in SECTION 1. During the pandemic, people were heavily reliant on services such as food delivery, door-to-door ride services, web-based services, and medical services. However, as outlined in SECTION 1, many of such services tend to be significantly or mostly inaccessible or non-inclusive of persons with disabilities – making it more difficult for persons with disabilities to access such essential amenities and services during the crisis of the pandemic.
Related CRPD Article(s): 9, 21

In addition, persons with disabilities have shared that they face attitudinal barriers during the pandemic such as safe-entry checkpoint officers not being well trained to assist them. Some deaf persons have shared that with the use of masks, they cannot rely on lip-reading, and have had to request that individuals write or type on their phones to communicate; however, deaf persons have shared that akin to pre-pandemic times, non-deaf and non-disabled people are usually unwilling to accommodate and unwilling to type what they want to say, resulting in deaf individuals being ignored or shouted at.
Related CRPD Article(s): 8

The shift to work from home protocols produced both relief and frustrations for persons with disabilities during the pandemic. On the one hand, work from home protocols provided accessibility for many persons with disabilities. On the other hand, the shift to work from home produced feelings of frustration for a number of persons with disabilities as many of the same jobs they were rejected from prior to the pandemic due to reasonable accommodation requests such as the need to work from home were suddenly made into remote positions. Persons with disabilities have also shared that they not only feel frustration, but also a sense of fear that many such accessibilities that were gained during the pandemic such as work from home will be lost once Singapore recovers from the pandemic. Persons with disabilities - especially many of whom are also in the high-risk category for catching COVID-19 - have shared that the current mindset of the government of trying to “live with the virus” is already causing them much fear and concern.
Related CRPD Article(s): 4(1); 5(2), (3); 25; 27

As Singapore and the rest of the world are not out of the pandemic yet, and as it is not unlikely that new variants may emerge, DPA thus underscores the urgency of the recommendations that are outlined in SECTION 1. The need for access and inclusion is all the more important during times of crises and disruption and it is our hope that such lessons from the pandemic thus far will lead to a more accessible and inclusive Singapore.

THE CASE OF MR. NAGAENTHRAN DHARMALINGAM AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Mr. Nagaenthran Dharmalingam was executed in April 2022 on charges of drug-related offences. Mr Dharmalingam’s case is relevant to a review of Singapore’s commitments to the CRPD given reports that he had an intellectual disability, a deteriorating mental health condition and had been a victim of human trafficking.⁶⁰

The case raises concerns with regard to Article 13 of the CRPD – Access to Justice. Namely, whether the Criminal Justice System as a whole has sufficient procedural accommodations in place for persons with disabilities to be able to access justice on an equal basis with others.

While procedural accommodations do exist within Singapore’s criminal justice system, disabled advocates note that Mr. Dharmalingam was not accorded such procedural accommodations

⁶⁰ United Nations. (2022) “Singapore: UN experts urge immediate end to death penalty” United Nations News. <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/05/1118132>>

consistently over the various stages of his interactions with the criminal justice system – from his interactions with the police, to his trial, to his various appeals – over the course of ten years.⁶¹ Moreover, disabled advocates have noted that the procedural accommodations available in Singapore’s criminal justice system are not completely aligned with the International Principles and Guidelines on Access to Justice for Persons with Disabilities released by the CRPD Committee.⁶² In addition, advocates have noted that the current use of “abnormality of mind” – a clause in the law used to provide exceptions to persons with disabilities facing sentences of the death penalty is both outdated and unclear, while also not being aligned with international law and conventions such as the CRPD.⁶³

Related CRPD Article(s): 1; 4(1); 13; 14

Additionally, disabled advocates have called into question Mr. Dharmalingam’s treatment over the ten years – especially noting his sentence to solitary confinement was not aligned with the CRPD especially given his mental health conditions.⁶⁴ Other cases in recent years have also raised questions about the availability of accommodations in the justice system for people with mental health conditions and other disabilities such as autistic individuals – especially people from other marginalised communities.⁶⁵

Related CRPD Article(s): 13; 14

Mr. Dharmalingam’s case thus raises questions about whether there are sufficient measures in place to ensure equitable access to justice for persons with disabilities in Singapore. DPA thus recommends that after consultation with the disability community, additional measures be put in place for protocols to be aligned with the International Principles and Guidelines on Access to Justice for Persons with Disabilities, along with any subsequent amendments to be made in light of the adoption of such principles.

Related CRPD Article(s): 13; 14

CONCLUDING REMARKS

DPA welcomes conversations with individuals from the Singapore government and other sectors of Singapore society regarding working together on such recommendations.

⁶¹ We Who Witness. (2021) “Call from Persons with Disabilities to Halt the Imminent Execution of Nagaenthran a/l K Dharmalingam” <<https://wewhowitness.wordpress.com/2021/11/06/joint-statement-nagaenthran/?fbclid=IwAR1jsfi2fhac6BFurj8hSHGQFCjKmvGK-S8e3CVFKzisQCDssDIK1yC3WAc>>

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Transformative Justice Collective. (2022) “Explainer: The “Abnormality of Mind” Exemption” TJC.org. <<https://transformativejusticecollective.org/2022/03/17/explainer-the-abnormality-of-mind-exemption/>>

⁶⁴ We Who Witness. (2021) “Call from Persons with Disabilities to Halt the Imminent Execution of Nagaenthran a/l K Dharmalingam”

⁶⁵ Justice4Harvey. (2020) “Justice for Harvey” < <https://justice4harvey.carrd.co/>>

ABBREVIATIONS

AED	Allied Educators
CCE	Character and Citizenship Education
CLFS	Comprehensive Labour Force Survey
CPF	Central Provident Fund
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DPA	Disabled People's Association
EBH	Enabling Business Hubs
ECT	Employment Claims Tribunal
EEC	Enabling Employment Credit
EIPIC	Early Intervention Programme for Infants and Children
F&B	Food and Beverage
FM	Frequency Modulation
HR	Human Resource
IHL	Institutes of Higher Learning
IMH	Institute of Mental Health
LBS	Learning and Behavioural Support
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOM	Ministry of Manpower
MSF	Ministry of Social and Family Development

NS	National Service
ODP	Open Door Programme
SEC	Special Employment Credit
SEN	Special Education Needs
SGSL	Singapore Sign Language
SPED	Special Education
SSA	Social Service Agencies
TAFEP	Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices
TSS	Taxi Subsidy Scheme
TT-CDC	Tamesek Trust-CDC
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
WICA	Work Injury Compensation Act