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The National Commission for the Handicapped

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In order to understand the function of the National Commission for the Handicapped in the background of the existing structures in our island, it is necessary to explain, in short, what urged the government to set up this commission and to implement it in this present form and structure instead of in any other form or structure.

For the last years, groups and voluntary organisations, felt that they should urge the authorities of this country to set up a structure within government to take care of the needs of the handicapped. These recommendations were made because the organisations felt the need that these efficient means should be created through which they could be in close contact with the national executive authorities, and at the same time have a direct say in the needed decisions that were to be taken.

In other words, it was necessary that the resources already in existence in the voluntary organisations should be amalgamated with those existing within the Government system. The joint forces could thus work towards the introduction of the necessary reforms so that the handicapped in our islands can experience a quality of life in line with today's needs.

This aim could be reached through the formation of a group of people that necessarily had to include representatives from five sectors that is:

- 1) The voluntary organisations;
- 2) The main government departments;
- 3) Experts in the field of the handicapped;
- 4) The handicapped themselves and also;
- 5) Members of families having a handicapped person.

It has also been necessary for this group to function without bureaucratic obstacles, but at the same time with a certain level of authority and with as direct access as possible with the highest civil authorities of the country.

The Setting Up and the Composition of the Commission

It was on the basis of these criteria that the government set up the National Commission for the Handicapped as it is made up today, that is with representatives from the department of Welfare, the department of Education, the department of Health, the department of Housing, the department of Social Security and the department of Labour. Apart from these the Commission comprise five representatives from the Federation of the organisation for the handicapped, and five persons chosen because of their experience and their qualifications. Members include three handicapped persons, parents of handicapped children as well as representatives from Gozo. The Commission has a full-time secretary that attends all the meetings and today the commission has a clerical staff of three persons.

The Commission is presided by myself as its Chairman. Notice of the establishment of the Commission was given through a declaration in Parliament by the Minister for Social Policy in October 1987. The Commission's first meeting was held at Castille, on the 3rd November, 1987. The Commission members have continued to meet regularly since then at its offices at the Centre for Social Work in St.Venera.

Aims

Naturally the most important aspect of the Commission comprises the action span that it has and the aims and functions it has that were established when it was set up.

These were divided into five sections and I think it is appropriate that I mention them with a certain amount of detail.

1. The first function that the Commission has, is to ensure that the government's programme regarding the handicapped, is implemented. In this respect, it has to be said that the Commission does not limit itself to that which has to do with the handicapped person directly, but it also extends its action to embrace that which regards the families of the handicapped, as well as that which has to do with the voluntary organisations established on our islands and that work in this field.
2. The second function is that the Commission co-ordinates the work between the different departments of the government during the implementation of all decisions made in this sector or any measures that the Commission deems

necessary from time to time. Naturally, this function compliments the first function and is absolutely necessary to avoid duplication of work, and a waste of energy, thus ensuring that the measures will be implemented in an organized way. This is the reason why the main Government departments are represented by high officials. It must be said that the contribution by these representatives has been very positive because in actual fact they contributed actively even in matters and initiatives which did not fall within their particular departments.

3. The third function undertaken is to keep as close a contact as possible with all the voluntary organisations for the Handicapped. This aspect too is of basic importance, because it was felt that any measure or initiative could only be taken after having directly consulted the people who have close contacts with handicapped persons, and are more sensitive to their needs.
4. The fourth function of the Commission is the identification of the needs of the handicapped, their families or the respective voluntary bodies, working amongst them, as also to take the necessary action which the Commission deems appropriate to meet these needs. It must be noted that this aspect is different from the other function already mentioned, since those cover the implementation of the Government's programme, while this function covers the demands, wishes, suggestions, criticism and ideas that come directly from the handicapped, their families or their organisations.
5. Finally the Commission was given the function to provide those centralised services that are considered necessary to achieve its aims and also which are beneficial to the organisations working in this field.

After analysing these five functions, one can easily realise that the Commission is primarily thought of as an instrument to further active communications between Government and the handicapped and vice-versa. I am using the words "active communication" because in order to shoulder this responsibility the Commission has also the responsibility to study and analyse everything which comes to its notice and to propose recommendations or take those actions which it deems appropriate in the circumstances.

This aspect resulted to be one of the most positive functions during the past 18 months since the Commission was established. Often the Commission had to intervene by presenting suggestions and alternative proposals when Government was going to implement new initiatives in order to make them better or else more beneficial to those in greater need. Example of such exercise were the Scheme on The Improvement Of Homes Occupied By Handicapped Persons Or Their Families, Incentive Schemes to Industries and also the Special Allowance for Handicapped Children. In each case mentioned here, the Commission's contribution was important and in fact, I am

pleased to say that in each case, the particular Minister or the Parliamentary Secretary accepted nearly all our demands.

On the other hand, there are examples when the Commission received for its consideration, suggestions and initiatives put forward from organisations and individuals. Also in such cases, these proposals were examined and in certain cases, the Commission made suggestions and amendments and then, the project was finally formally presented to the Minister concerned.

Another aspect which must be studied during this analysis is that regarding the nature of the Commission. I have already described the Commission as an instrument of active communication which gathers together, on the one hand, Government resources, and on the other hand individual resources. (That is the handicapped, his family and his organisation). This means that the Commission is not and should never be a Government department. Bureaucracy does not form part of it, and as a matter of fact should be a means to overcome bureaucracy so as to ensure that its proposals are implemented.

There is another aspect which must be considered, that is the Commission, is not an organisation or a federation of organisations. On the contrary its aim is to complement the present organisations and help them get stronger and to function more efficiently. This implies that the Commission has no interest in taking over any initiative brought forward by an organisation or group. On the contrary it will try to support that organisation in its project and give it all the necessary help so that it will succeed in the proposed idea.

The main advantage which comes out of this situation consists of the fact that the Commission is not hindered by considerations extraneous to the real needs of the handicapped. In other words, it has no interest to make propaganda for its accomplishments, it has no interest to win over or increase its membership, to be congratulated for its activities. Every decision taken is independent of these considerations and everyone values how advantageous this is in an island like ours where there is a great danger that one could actually be misinterpreted for this reason.

Experience Gained

It is not my idea, to mention the achievements of the Commission during its one and a half years since it was established, because I think that this is not the aim of this seminar. Hence I am going to limit myself and make some general comments which I deem appropriate to the discussion which might arise in the seminar.

Let me first say that the Commission has prepared two reports for the Minister for Social Policy. These reports were drawn up in June 1988 and November 1988. These

reports contain an analysis, objective as far as possible, of the progress registered by the Commission and of the difficulties which it was facing. These reports were drawn up on the request of the Minister himself so as to study whether it was opportune or not for the Commission's structure to be regulated more officially, that is through 'ad hoc' legislation as is the case in other countries. This is an important development which I think will continue to strengthen the foundations on which the Commission's work is based.

As a matter of fact, last December a step in this direction was taken when, the sum of Lm5000 was voted in the yearly government budget, for the administration of the Commission. Although this is a nominal sum, this established a principle whereby the Commission was confirmed not only as a consultative body but also as a body with quasi-executive functions. In fact, it is aimed that eventually, the Commission will be given more responsibilities regarding the administration of certain services which up till now are being delivered by Government departments or individuals.

The Commission is seriously considering this aspect, because although it believes that certain services should be centralised and even eventually administered by its staff, the Commission should pay great attention so that it does not transform itself into a department. Hence it must strive to find the middle course so that it will continue to keep its identity as explained earlier on.

Probably the greatest difficulty facing the Commission is the fact that there is so much to be done and that they are all of great importance. Even here, the members of the Commission had to and must continue to exercise a certain degree of prudence and common sense, in order to be capable of identifying the priorities both as regards to urgency and also regarding maturity and reality. This implies that the Commission must not only identify the needs, but in each case it has to undertake another exercise to examine the feasibility of certain measures. Hence, for example, the Commission certainly has to keep in mind the existing limitations due to lack of specialised staff and also the limitations imposed by our country's financial resources.

As a result of these limitations the Commission members immediately decided that it was necessary for its work to be regulated as far as possible in a logical and orderly manner. This could only be achieved, after having undertaken a thorough examination of the present situation in our country, together with the immediate and further needs. This was an exercise which the Commission members could not undertake alone and hence it was decided to establish a number of sub-committees. Each such committee was asked to present a written report on the subject assigned. More than sixty people were involved in this exercise all of them directly or individually involved in the field under consideration.

Reports were received up to October 1988. In the meantime, the Commission decided to consider each report's recommendations one after each other thus ensuring that those recommendations which are accepted may be implemented. By using this method, the Commission has succeeded in taking certain very important measures and although this is a very lengthy detailed exercise, I am sure that we are working so that these reports will not end, like many other long reports do without any action being taken.

These reports helped the Commission to be in a position to plan its action adequately, both on a short term basis and also regarding those future developments which have been identified. Hence, I think it is opportune that I dedicate the last part of my paper to the Commission's policy with regards to the main fields in which the Commission intends to concentrate its activity in the months and years ahead.

With regards to the Commission's policy for the past months the Commission felt the need to concentrate on five principal aspects which are

- (a) immediate measures to form an assessment of all children up to possibly ten years of age with the aim that this exercise will continue and will be extended to all categories;
- (b) for training and specialisation of staff and personnel within the main state/government departments
- (c) an increase in social benefits and proposals to amend those laws that will eliminate existing discrepancies
- (d) introduction of measures to encourage handicapped persons to reach for the world of work and
- (e) to gather information through a survey so as to create the basis for a national register.

In each one of these aspects, the Commission has already presented its concrete proposals and in some of them, the Government has already given its approval and are in an advanced stage of implementation.

With regards to the Commission's projected policy for the next two years, it is planned that the following services will be analysed, so as to take the necessary actions according to the circumstances. These sectors are:

- (a) the educational sector which naturally includes special schools together with day care centres and other Governmental institutions including those which today are run by the Welfare department
- (b) the employment sector with special reference to strengthening Governmental service to strongly ensure that more places of work that are suitable for the handicapped are found
- (c) establishing centralised services at the Commission office amongst which will include: from study material on all aspects related to the handicapped, to

specimen of aids for the handicapped which can be tried by the handicapped themselves or by members of the voluntary bodies.

Finally there are also long term measures which are also being planned. In this respect, the Commission plans to implement those measures and recommendations found in the sub-committee reports mentioned earlier on, and any aspect identified during this seminar. In this field, the list is so long that I can't go into details because of the limited time available.

However, I think I can conclude this paper with the following message. In my opinion the Commission is duty bound to give a message to the Maltese people. We will be failing in our duty if we do not acknowledge that the handicapped person always found the support of the Maltese and Gozitan people. Support which often has been translated into financial contribution and other material which helped to establish various projects in this field. This is due to the generosity of the Maltese people and to those individuals who shouldered great responsibility because of their strong blind faith in Divine Providence. I can mention a long list of such people but I am afraid that I may omit someone and this will be a great mistake on my part which I would like not to make.

We and all the Maltese people must praise and acknowledge all this. However, I think it is time that we progress further. We must make a further step in our thinking as a kind and generous people. We must also be generous in our respect towards human beings by recognising the rights of minorities - especially that minority which has no fault of its own, which is at a disadvantage in the day-to-day struggle to live.

The Maltese and Gozitan handicapped people are calling on us to acknowledge their rights as citizens equal to me and to you. They, like us have a right for the best medical services, to have the best possible education, that they have places where they can play and entertain themselves during their spare time. Like us, they have a right to experience satisfaction through work, to receive pay for their services rendered so that our society will continue to progress. They too have a right to be able to visit our cathedrals and museums, that they may be able to go and read a book at our libraries, both if this happens to be in Valletta or if it is at our University.

All help asked for is not being asked for as an act of charity but as of right. I say this in the name of all handicapped persons not through arrogance but with respect towards them as persons. This is nothing but solidarity in its truest sense and I think the time is ripe for this principle to be accepted by one and all.

This is the message which the Commission is in duty bound to give through its work. If it succeeds in this mission, then the Commission would have rendered the best possible service to the whole Maltese community.