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The Handicapped and Employment

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In Malta the rights of the handicapped have been recognised since February 1969 when the Act about the Employment of Handicapped Persons was enacted. It is very interesting to note that the Act refers to “disabled persons” and not to “handicapped persons”. The first group are those persons who are not able to work, even after being trained, the second are considered as persons with some form of disability who can do certain jobs after being trained.

The Act is very extensive but while this is not the place to discuss it, one should mention three of its important provisions. These are:

1. The power of the Minister responsible to arrange for a service which brings about a vocation, a service for the re-establishment of handicapped persons and courses of training and rehabilitation.
2. The preparation and provision of a Register of Handicapped Persons as a means to their subsequent employment.
3. The setting up of a Consultation Committee for the Re-establishment of Handicapped Persons.

In simpler terms there exists a legal and administrative frame work to ensure that a handicapped person, handicapped from birth as well as handicapped as a result of an accident, has the opportunity for integrating himself as an active member in society. This is the main aim of any arrangements which are made. A handicapped person should not feel apart from society. Work within the handicapped person's capabilities should be given and more importantly, the handicapped person must not be made to feel that he is being given the job out of charity.

The handicapped person has as much the right to work as does any other person.

It is important to see what employers can do in respect to the employment of handicapped persons, and how they can be helped to do more. One of our biggest problems is the small capacity of the majority of Maltese companies. A small company implies a small number of workers and this creates a difficulty in the employment of persons who are not fully 'fit'. I reckon that some of you present here are saying "that's a fine excuse". In fact this is no excuse at all. If out of one hundred workers you have two who can only to certain type of work, this does not create any problems, but if you have one worker out of ten whose flexibility on the job is limited, it is a different matter.

Thus the first point to be made is the need of a flexible policy when it comes to placing a handicapped person in some kind of job, and this in the highest interest of the handicapped. A flexible policy must also include a direct and continuous participation of both employers and unions.

Representatives of unions of employers and of workers should be amongst the members of the Consultation Committee for the Re-establishment of Handicapped Persons. Lately this committee has not been elected. There may be several reasons for this, amongst which the possibility of change in the law. This committee should be set up as soon as possible so that both employers and unions will have the chance of contributing towards bettering the arrangements being made for the training and employment of handicapped persons.

We have to be clear in this. A programme of Rehabilitation for Handicapped Persons and their integration in the work force requires help from both the State and from voluntary organisations as well as partnership between the employers and the unions. The state must give encouragement through making training centres available and also by means of subsidies. The voluntary organisations can compliment the efforts of the State by counselling the handicapped persons and by serving as their spokesmen with the employers. While the owners of companies of a certain size should be ready to employ a number of workers with a disability, so the unions must encourage their members to make a little more effort at work so that there will be more of a chance for handicapped workers.

It is quite clear that to increase the number of employment opportunities for persons with a physical or mental handicap, there must be a change in the system of work of a number of jobs. There is need for analysis in order to see what certain types of jobs which until today were not considered fit for handicapped persons involve. Allow me to explain better. If a skilled worker injures himself or is taken ill and is handicapped as a result, say by 25%, his employer might be able to change the system of work in order to make use of his experience. The employer would more likely be ready to do this because of the respect and responsibility he feels towards that person. It is less probable that he will do the same if the person applying for a job is handicapped but

without any experience. Here the government has to intervene to subsidize the company in order that it will be able to make the changes necessary to employ this handicapped worker.

In a small country like Malta, where companies are often small, we tend to turn always to the government which in turn falls to the temptation of passing legislation rather than organising incentive schemes and subsidies. Without any hesitation, I say that the Malta Employers' Association is against any form of legislative imposition. This is not only wrong in itself but the handicapped person who is offered employment under these circumstances often feels that he is only being employed out of a sense of charity. This, surely, is not right.

I have mentioned partnership between employers and unions. This is needed in particular companies so that the work which can be done by handicapped persons be identified. But this is not enough. Until now the unions of employers and workers, neither on their own nor together, have yet planned a policy about the training and employment of handicapped persons. This Seminar might lead the way to this.

Amongst the types of jobs that the companies might give to handicapped persons are packing and mechanical work of simple nature. This type of work can be identified by "Works Committee" between the management and the union, similar to those which exist in many companies for "Health and Safety". When these posts are identified and the necessary training established there will be a need of co-ordination with the department responsible for the training of the handicapped so that persons with some kind of disability will be given the necessary training before they start working in the company. That is why there is a need for incentives, even financial, from the part of the government.

This meeting organised by the National Commission For The Handicapped and The Parents' Society For Handicapped Children is the first step towards a new policy where the handicapped can and should be helped to feel that he is a 'whole' member of the Maltese Society. If Government, as Government and as an employer, employers and unions work hand in hand, there is no reason why handicapped persons should continue to feel emarginated because of lack of training or opportunity to work.