



nothing about us without us

Inside the Disability Rights Movement of South Africa



William Rowland

nothing about us without us

Inside the Economic Empowerment of South Africa

William D. Hawkins

University of South Africa
Pretoria



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This book is also available in braille and in audio editions from the South African Library for the Blind, Grahamstown.



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foreword

William Rowland's book, NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US: Inside the Disability Rights Movement of South Africa, is a true insider's tale. Dr Rowland narrates the story of the disability movement in South Africa with the candour, sincerity and depth of commitment which his own life depicts as a person with a disability in South Africa. He is correct to say that this is a story that has not come to an end, and maybe will never end. Indeed it is true that no one can ever claim the right to tell the story with the authority of the entire disability movement. And yet it is a story that has to be shared. No better person could have undertaken the task than Dr Rowland. Certainly, I even doubt that anyone could have done it better. He has been at the heart of the movement from the beginning. He has seen the beginnings of and has shaped the thinking of the disability rights movement in our country. He has been a very influential advocate for people with disabilities even during the dark years preceding democracy. During the democratic decade, he has not spared himself in challenging our society to live up to the ideals of our Constitution and he has challenged disabled people themselves to look beyond the welfarist mentality and take charge of their own development. Everywhere he is held in high regard and is an influential

advocate for the rights of disabled people. And yet, even he can only tell this story from his own perspective. Others may bring other perspectives. Indeed, this book may encourage others from within the disability movement to tell their own stories.

The book is cast in a narrative mode. It is not a dry, analytical text for the specialist. The style is easy and flowing. It is a human account of the movement and its personalities. And yet there is also something analytical and profound about the vignettes that are being shared, which themselves express a deeper socio-political understanding, a theoretical assessment and a strategic approach to growing a movement so that it was not only effective in lobbying but also in ensuring that it faithfully represented the interests of its members and was owned by them. The story is also told through the lenses of a few of the activists, organizers and public representatives.

The disability movement in South Africa has been hugely influential. The government of South Africa is sensitive about the place and visibility of disabled people in all aspects of the life of our country. I believe that that commitment is not mere populism. It is a commitment to ensure that our constitutional ideals find expression in the lives of all our people. The Preamble to the Constitution, for example, states that it is the purpose of the Constitution to 'improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person...' Equally the Bill of Rights, 'the cornerstone of our democracy', enshrines the rights of all our people and obliges that all law should 'respect, protect, promote and fulfill the rights...'

It is therefore not surprising that Dr Rowland has cast this narrative in the idiom of human rights and development. That in itself marks a critical conceptual and strategic shift within the disability movement. Of course, this does not mean that

one should not be concerned about the health and welfare of those in need but that health and welfare are no longer seen in charitable terms nor are they any longer simply a disabling concern. It should be about self-reliance, empowerment, human development, and human security – hence the slogan, ‘nothing about us without us’.

The South African political and democratic system seeks to achieve optimal social cohesion, in which people with disabilities will not be mere curiosities but form part of the mainstream of society bringing out the best quality of ubuntu, in every family and in every South African. People with disabilities, somehow, remind us of our common humanity.

During this tenth anniversary year of our democracy, Dr Rowland’s book will not only remind us about the road we have travelled. It will call us afresh to a common responsibility about the well-being of our society. This should be a popular read.

N Barney Pityana

First Chairperson of the South African Human Rights Commission and currently Principal and Vice Chancellor of the University of South Africa.

Pretoria, 27 February 2004.

introduction

One of us had to write this book.

But the years have passed. Some have died, others have moved on, and all of us have begun to forget, as I found when I started to check the facts.

But this book really had to be written, because the disability rights movement in South Africa was part – and not the least part, by any means – of the liberation struggle in the country. We were part of the resistance, we became part of the chaos, and today we are helping to strengthen our new democracy.

Walter Sisulu, who spent more than 26 years in prison with Nelson Mandela, once made a remark that still means a lot to me. He said that on Robben Island, when they got hold of their smuggled newspapers, they would sometimes read about our activities. And they would say to each other, ‘even the disabled people’, and that was an encouragement to them.

Perhaps this book would never have been written were it not for a letter I received from a blind friend in the United States, Kathy Martinez, herself a disability activist. An internet maga-

zine was to be launched, to be called DisabilityWorld, and would I contribute monthly articles? I knew at once that this would impose the discipline to research, write, and interview for the book that had to be; and so I agreed.

The book has a very loose structure, but an intentional one. The first two chapters describe the onward rush of the disability struggle as part of the broader political movement in the country. The next chapter deals with economic empowerment, as an extension of the struggle into new areas. I then give an account of the transformation in my own organization, the SANCB, and go on to describe three unique initiatives in South Africa, new models of service delivery and self-help, one might say.

This is followed by five interviews, each giving a personal perspective on our movement and recounting particular aspects of its history. In the last chapter rural development and the spread of the movement throughout the Southern African region are taken up.

Writing each chapter was an absorbing process and often a lot of fun. Nearly always one would end up reminiscing with friends and old comrades and always one would end up with far too much material for the apportioned space.

Selecting the persons to be interviewed was very difficult. In the end, with some advice, I deliberately chose four women with different disabilities, and Mike du Toit, because of his involvement with the movement throughout.

The hardest part to write, strangely, was the final paragraph, which took two days, compared to just fifteen minutes for this introduction. I tried three different versions and even now I have my doubts about the wording. Perhaps the problem was this: how do you end a story that hasn't yet ended?

Checking the facts was not always easy. It took me from the archives of the SANCB to the website of the TRC, from the files of my PA, Val Pond, to documents of the United Nations. And then there were peoples' memories.

To obtain data for the chapter on housing I eventually activated eight different institutions, township residents, and internet-surfing friends, and I am still not sure that I understand the befuddling maze of scrapped legislation that once ruled peoples' lives.

Which means that far too many people assisted with information to be listed here. I must, however, acknowledge the indispensable role of Mike du Toit in checking the accuracy of the text and captioning the photographs, Jenny de Bruin for many hours of typing and countless reprints, and Barney Pityana for volunteering UNISA Press for the conversion of my manuscript into a real book.

Finally, I end this task with an inevitable sense of guilt towards many disabled people whose hardships and sacrifices equally should have been part of this story, but are not. I beg their forgiveness. All I can offer in defence is my feeling that it had to be a concise history and that more interviews would have overlapped.

I will, however, give an honourable mention to two men, not themselves disabled, but allies whose commitment to the disability rights movement has resulted in some of our biggest breakthroughs and whose respect is our inspiration. I refer to our remarkable patron, President Thabo Mbeki, and of course to Minister Essop Pahad, often our chastizer, but always our friend.

William Rowland

chapter 1

nothing about us

without us



Friday Mavuso, President Nelson Mandela and the author, Dr William Rowland, photographed at the first ANC/Shell House meeting.

Disability in South Africa has to be viewed against the background of the liberation struggle. During the 1980s and early 90s disabled people were part of that struggle and today we share in the fruits of a new democracy.

For every person that died in the struggle, three others became disabled, and it was largely from this pool of injury and anger that the leadership emerged of Disabled People South Africa (DPSA), the organization that has spearheaded the disability rights movement in the country. These were also the conditions that gave rise to a mass movement of disabled people, which at its peak must have numbered 10 000 to 12 000 activists, working in unison and speaking with one unsilenceable voice.

My purpose in this chapter is neither to give a short history nor to document in full the events of those turbulent times. It is simply to record some personal recollections as a backdrop to what I shall have to say in the chapters to come. And this is how, for me, it all began.

I fly to Durban to attend the Third Congress of People with

Disabilities, as observer. I arrive at the Amanzimtoti Town Hall to be greeted by my first comrade, Mike du Toit. He tells me there is a move for me to be the first Chairperson of DPSA, and I say that others have earned the right more than me.

At lunch I am joined by Joshua Malinga of Zimbabwe - future Chairperson of Disabled Peoples' International – and he tries to persuade me with political arguments, but I remain resistant. And then, the next morning I am visited by Elda Olifant, on behalf of the Soweto contingent, and her impassioned words convince me. I agree to serve, provided all the other leaders are prepared to participate. And that's the way it was, back then in September 1984.

My next memory is of a DPSA congress a few years later. Jerry Nkeli – a future Human Rights Commissioner – takes the floor and calls for proceedings to be suspended and for us to take to the streets to protest against the government's handling of disability grants, for the majority their only source of income. And so we break up into action groups – transport, slogans and posters, media – and two hours later we are on the road and singing freedom songs.

As we reach the bottom end of West Street in Durban, the lead cars draw level with each other, and stop dead. It is rush hour on a Friday afternoon and there is instant mayhem, with the traffic gridlocked and motorists swearing at us. We disembark and begin to toyi toyi and chant our slogans. And this goes on for three quarters of an hour before the riot police show up and try to find the leader of the protest, as we deliberately confuse them.

I negotiate a peaceful ending with the police and I ask the comrades to return to their vehicles – 'real slowly now', I say, and it takes an age.

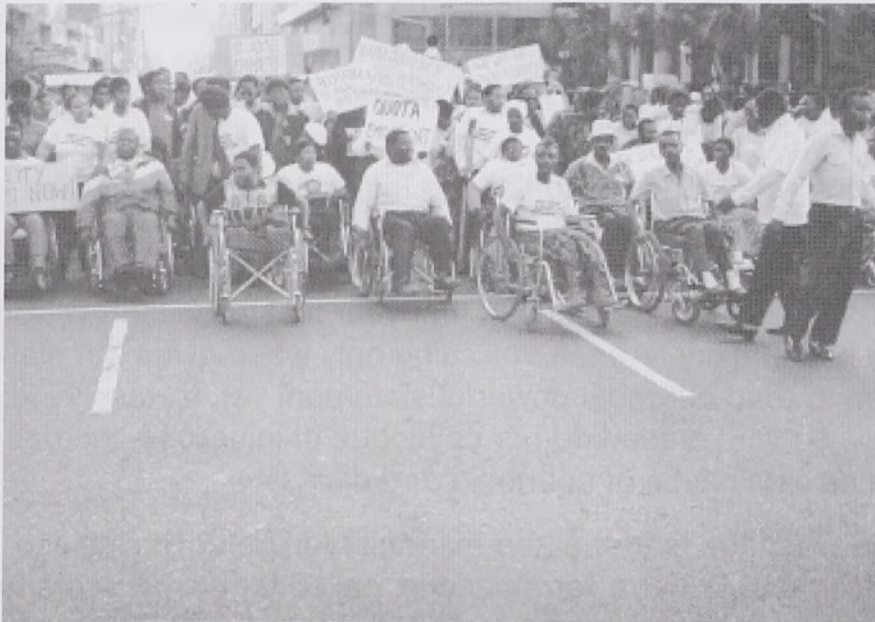
The next week I am questioned by the police but nothing else happens.

Those were exciting times, but stressful. And there were many such occasions.

Having refused to recognize the International Year of Disabled Persons, the South African Government in 1986 proclaimed its own politically expedient Year of Disabled Persons. It was in Bloemfontein that year that we withdrew from the national conference, returning only when given the platform to read our most powerful statement yet. It was Phindi Mavuso who presented our catalogue of injustices, the double discrimination of apartheid and disability.

And when the leader of the extremist Afrikaner Resistance Movement, Eugene Terreblanche, called for his followers to arm themselves with a million rifles, it was Friday Mavuso who had 1200 of us march up a Soweto hill to the Baragwanath Hospital gates to hold our protest rally against the rising tide of violence. How stunned we all were that April morning in 1995, several years later, on learning of Friday's road accident. His untimely death deprived us of our most charismatic leader. And how moved I was to sit in his small bedroom after the Soweto funeral, talking to the family – such a humble home; such a great man.

Of course, we did a great deal more than protest. As time progressed, two initiatives took shape, a political one, to mobilize disabled people to claim their rights, and a developmental one, taking the form of income generation through self-help. We also articulated a new philosophy: that disability was not a health and welfare issue, but a human rights and development issue; that the medical model of disability was inappropriate and that doctors and social workers should not run our lives; that the pacifist methods of struggle would best



The historic street demonstration in Durban.

serve our cause; and that we should align ourselves with the liberation movement. We became 'conscientised' and adopted our now famous slogan: 'Nothing About Us Without Us!'

I will not deny a darker side to these happenings. We had our power struggles and violence against others was contemplated, but the leadership remained fiercely loyal. We did receive veiled threats, mail was intercepted, and telephones were tapped. And yet we never wavered; after all there were many others in much greater peril than ourselves. And certainly there were life threatening incidents that have never been explained.

In our consultative forum with government we made three final demands, in the areas of access, transport, and social

grants, attached to a twelve-month ultimatum. The ultimatum expired and we set out to destroy all disability structures of government. For two years we were out in the cold and then came the momentous announcement by FW de Klerk of the unbannings, the release of Nelson Mandela, and political negotiations. And DPSA was right there in the thick of things, accepted by the ANC as member of the Patriotic Front Against Apartheid. And Friday Mavuso and I visiting Mr Mandela in Shell House to appeal for his intervention on our behalf in a matter of serious concern - the three of us chatting and holding hands, in gratitude and comradeship. And later, our serving in the Inauguration Committee when Mr Mandela became President.

And now it is more than ten years on from our first meeting with Mr Mandela, and twenty years since that historical congress. The time of struggle is behind us and what lies ahead is a time of delivery. And some believe that will be the hardest part.

Joshua Malinga of Zimbabwe, twice Chairperson of DPI and current Secretary General of PAPOD, reminding about the struggle years of the 80s.

chapter 2

forcing open the

doors of delivery



Joshua Malinga of Zimbabwe, twice Chairperson of DPI and current Secretary General of PAFOD, reminiscing about the struggle years of the 80s.

‘Umkhonto we Sizwe! Umkhonto we Sizwe!’ It is the name of the armed wing of the ANC; these are also the words of a freedom song. The bus bounces up and down wildly as the youths stamp their feet and sing; it is a day of celebration and the joy of the people is unbounded.

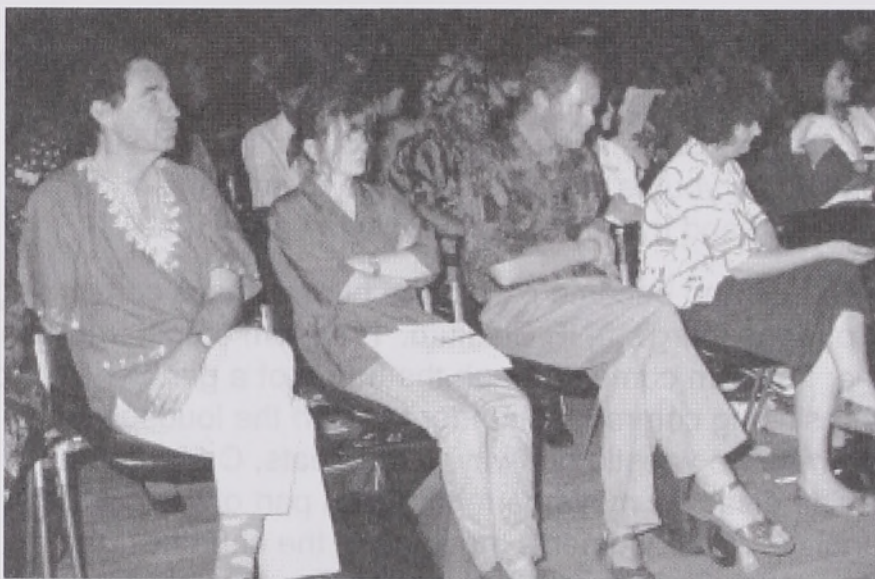
We de-bus and become part of the human mass converging on Johannesburg’s FNB Stadium. ‘Freedom come, freedom come; freedom come, through the barrel of a gun!’ The words of the singing comrades thunder through the loudspeaker system as we wrestle our way to our seats, Carla Zille and me. The disability movement has been part of the political struggle, like the women’s movement, the churches, the trade unions, and many other groups - and we are all here to receive the liberated leaders.

A praise poet takes the stage to hail the returning heroes. The crowd roars ‘Viva the struggle of the people! Long live Nelson Mandela! Long live Fidel Castro! Long live’

And suddenly they are there: ‘the first eight’ to be released from prison; Walter Sisulu, after nearly 27 years in jail,

Achmed Kathrada, and all the others, after decades of incarceration. And their speeches are almost anti-climactic – reflective, philosophical, fragments of history, but, oh yes, defiant and uncompromising.

And now it is 11 February 1990 and the entire nation is waiting for the unbelievable to happen. Carla describes what she is seeing on TV and I tell her what I hear: Mandela walks through the gates of the Victor Verster prison ... the motorcade speeds to Cape Town ... Mandela steps out onto the City Hall balcony to address the jubilant crowd, and for the first time in our lives we hear that singular voice. It is the



Albie Sachs (left), veteran anti-apartheid activist and victim of an apartheid police bomb, attends an early DPSA Congress. Now a Constitutional Court Judge, Albie strongly supported the disability provisions in the Constitution. Sitting to the right of Mike du Toit is Lidia Pretorius, an occupational therapist turned politician who was a pioneer supporter of the disability struggle, and to Lidia's right, Fadila Lagadien, an evergreen disability activist, now a member of the Board of the South African Broadcasting Corporation.

same voice that four years later, after the first democratic election, will proclaim: 'Free at last!'

That was the first day of the future in South Africa, in my opinion. We in DPSA had long prepared ourselves for the coming negotiations, but what we had not anticipated was the chaos of a country in transition. Racial barriers were gone. Every social system was under review. Old laws were being scrapped. New people were in charge everywhere, people without any background in disability and with other priorities. Who to speak to? What to say? How to say it? Where to say it? How to be heard at all amongst the hundreds of activist groups making demands and clamoring for influence.

Almost by default we begin to focus on the provisions of the draft constitution, specifically on the Bill of Rights. We argue for an anti-discrimination clause, but the Constitution writers say that sufficient safeguards are provided elsewhere. We persist and certain wording is included, but then dropped, reincluded and dropped again. Fortunately we have allies and the gay lobby in particular voices support for our position. In the end a clause is adopted outlawing discrimination on a variety of grounds, including disability. It is our first victory in the new South Africa, giving disabled people a real sense of ownership of the constitution.

The constitution contains a second provision of which we can be proud. Having recognized eleven official languages, it goes on to name sign language as a further language to be developed. Even though we would have preferred to have sign language recognized as an official language, the existing wording does have important policy and funding implications. In actual fact, sign language is today often referred to as 'the twelfth language' of the country, even in official circles.

Disability in this way was put into a human rights context, but the development dimension was still lacking. Here the flagship programme of government was to promote reconstruction and development ('the RDP programme'). Again it proved extremely difficult to get our message across until, just days before publication of the policy paper, we met in emergency session with RDP Minister Jay Naidoo to extract from him the promise of inclusion. The result was a single paragraph committing the government to policy formulation and identifying disabled people as a 'vulnerable' group in society along with women, youth, and people in rural areas. Although the term 'vulnerable' has since been expunged from our vocabulary, an important principle had been established.

It was soon after this that Maria Rantho was deployed by the movement into a special office on disability within the RDP Programme. In time this office would become a fully-fledged Office on the Status of Disabled Persons (OSDP) which is today located within the Presidency itself and reports directly to a cabinet minister. The first task to hand at that time, though, was the drafting of what came to be called the Integrated National Disability Strategy (INDS) in consultation with the disability sector.

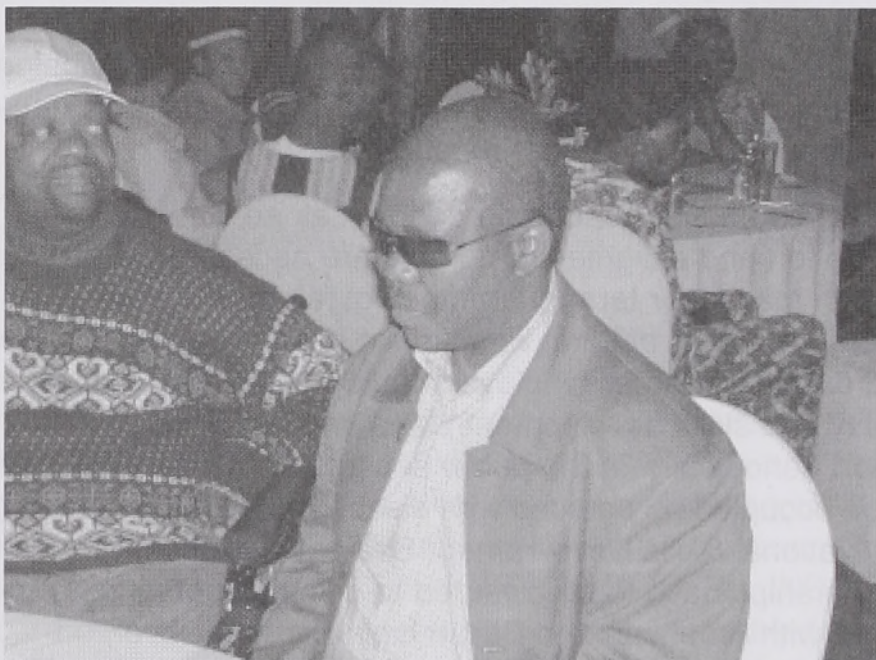
The INDS draws on the World Programme of Action and the UN Standard Rules for its content. It declares disability to be a human rights and development issue and indicates the priority areas to be targeted, these being education and training, employment, income maintenance and social security, and housing. Each area is assigned to a line department to be integrated into its policies and programmes. The INDS records environmental access as a concern of disabled people and recognizes the needs of 'sensitive' groups that are disabled, such as women, children, elderly and rural persons. Provision is made for the OSDP, as well as for the establish-

ment of a national co-ordinating committee. Drafted under the guidance of Maria Rantho, it was later strengthened and expanded under the direction of her successor in the OSDP, Shuaib Chalklen, and finally launched in November 1997.

Called to parliament by the ANC, Maria took her activism into the very corridors of power. One by one disabled men and women began to be appointed to positions in public life - The Human Rights Commission, the Gender Commission, the Youth Commission; the South African Broadcasting Corporation, the South African Tourism Board, the National Development Agency, and Ntsika (the agency for small business development). Not only is each of us required to advocate on behalf of disabled people in these positions of authority, but we are expected to report back to our constituency, that is the community of disabled people in the country. The principle of self-representation is fully accepted by government and the appointments are continuing, recent additions being the Public Service Commission, the national lottery distribution agency, and the transport parastatal.

But we can never depend on goodwill alone. Progressive legislation and enlightened policies are necessary to provide us with the longer term guarantees of fairness. Labour legislation prescribes affirmative action in relation to race, gender, and disability. Larger employers have to register employment equity and skills development plans on which they have to report periodically. In the public sector 2 percent of jobs have to be occupied by persons with disabilities by 2005. Under the National Skills Development Strategy 4 percent of learnerships have to be awarded to disabled persons. Compared with American and British legislation, however, enforcement mechanisms in South Africa are weak, while the disadvantages experienced by disabled persons in the fields of education and transport remain as negative factors.

One of the most positive policy directions has been that of black economic empowerment, which is inclusive of women and disabled persons. At an October 1998 Presidential Jobs Summit of the 'social partners' – government, organized business, trade unions, and community - our representatives were able to negotiate some challenging guideline targets, including a commitment by government that 5 percent of public sector spending to promote small business would be directed to the enterprises of disabled persons and a further commitment that 5 percent of government procurement would be allocated to businesses owned by disabled people or employers with at least 5 percent of disabled workers. There was also an undertaking to develop incentives for equity partnerships empowering disabled people economi-



Patrick Nkosi, currently a Deputy Chairperson of DPSA with Louis Nzimande, blind parliamentarian and Chairperson of DPSA.

cally. How we have leveraged this undertaking is a story in its own right and the subject of another chapter.

The impressions I have given are optimistic, and rightly so. South Africa is the envy of disabled people in most developing countries and hopefully some of the elements of our transformation will be replicable elsewhere. But at times the pace has been agonizingly slow and policy does not always translate into practice.

Telescoping the events of the past dozen years into a selective account such as this does tend to minimize the frustrations and disappointments suffered along the way, especially at the beginning. At one point Friday Mavuso and I seriously discussed a possible invasion of the Union Buildings. He would arrange a special tour and when they reached Mr Mandela's office they would stage a sit-in and demand to speak to the President. I would be the spokesperson on the outside priming the media. Happily, though, it never came to that. But there is a lingering impatience that cannot be ignored and which found vivid expression in the slogan chosen for the 2001 DPSA Congress: 'Forcing open the doors of delivery and equity!'

I end with another positive impression. In this instance I have been invited to witness the briefing of the new disabled parliamentarians by Essop Pahad, Minister in the Presidency. Wilma is concerned about the positioning of her interpreter on the floor of the house. They need to face each other for good communication. Louis wants to know about the immediate surroundings. Whether there is a garden if he needs to take his guide dog outside. Joseph asks about transport and parking. As a wheelchair user he has to be sure about the practical arrangements. Michael wishes to know what materials will be provided in braille.

chapter 3

bee and dec



President Thabo Mbeki, and Dr. Euclid Herie, former president of the World Blind Union, at the opening of the Perkins Braille factory in Cape Town. This is a joint-venture between the SANCB and the Perkins School for the Blind near Boston in the United States. The project was initially housed at the famed BayGen factory.

We are lunching at the Bullrun Restaurant, opposite the Johannesburg Securities Exchange. While sipping our wine, we are signing documents.

'I think this one is for William,' says Mike du Toit, and passes me four flimsy pages. I initial and sign, and the deal is done. We have just spent R15 million to acquire a 30 percent share in the company Armadillo.

With our help Armadillo has won the contract to supply vehicle bodies for the Telkom service fleet, upward of 6 000 units. Armadillo is also the leading manufacturer of rollerdoors for pickup trucks, and with the favourable Rand/Dollar exchange rate the exports we have in prospect look more promising by the day.

Chris Hassall, our financial consultant, proposes a toast and I clink glasses with the lawyer on my left. Amiel says, 'another good year like this one and we'll celebrate at Vic Falls – or Mauritius, maybe!' I smile but say nothing, because for me this is actually an emotional moment. And we must not take

our success for granted; the road we have travelled has been far too long and hard for that.

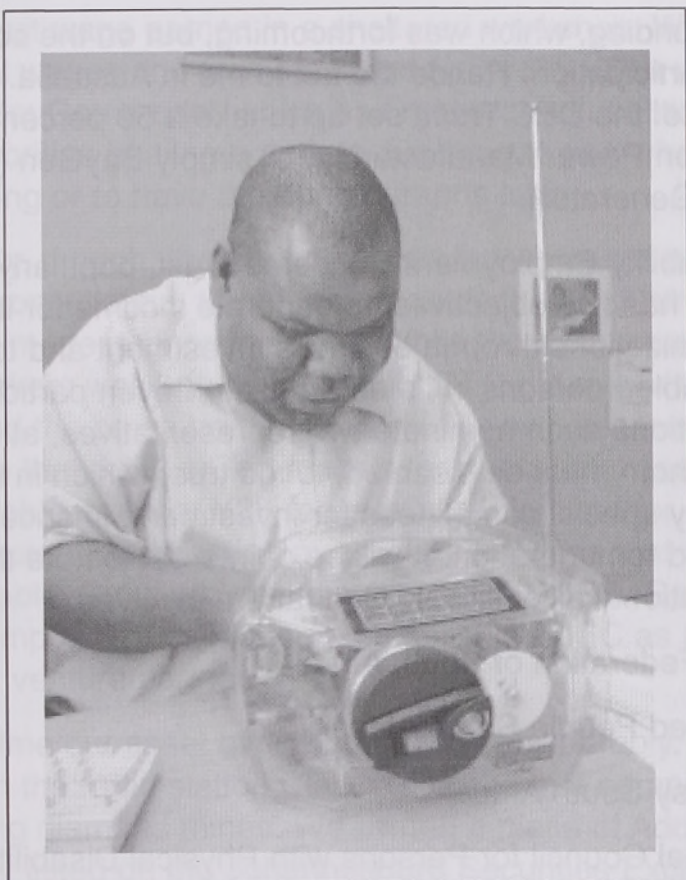
To make sense of the scene I have been describing one needs to know about black economic empowerment (BEE) in South Africa. This is a strategy to transfer the ownership, management, and control of the assets of the country into the hands of the majority of its citizens. The criteria applied in the awarding of public licences and government contracts and in the restructuring of state assets (privatization) are therefore intended to advance this objective. By including women and people with disabilities in its BEE initiatives the government has taken one of its most progressive steps to date.

This then is the policy environment in which we choose to be players. But how did it all begin?

It began with a fax. Arriving at a Sydney hotel for the 1995 DPI Congress, I found a message waiting for me. Would I like to be part of a project to manufacture wind-up radios in Cape Town? A bizarre idea at the time, I responded in a single word: 'Yes!' But why this unquestioning confidence?

Because the sender of the message was Hylton Appelbaum, Head of the Liberty Life Foundation, one of the foremost funding agencies in South Africa. There ought to be a word to describe someone like Hylton – brilliant, flamboyant, a mover and shaker; each epithet fits, but only partly. My trust, though, came from previous adventures.

Some years before I had founded the Viva Trust to market scratch cards for fundraising purposes. At the time this was an illegal activity, but having failed to persuade the responsible cabinet minister to grant us permission, I had decided to go ahead anyway. An added advantage was annoying a government we no longer respected. However, Viva needed



Maluta Mulibana familiarizes himself with the technology that powers the wind-up radio, produced at BayGen, DEC's first manufacturing enterprise.

financial backing to float the operation. Who in the corporate world would take such a risk? The answer was Hylton, to the tune of a R2 million guarantee.

But that's another story. Let's get back to wind-up radios.

It was the BBC, in a science programme called 'Clever Trevor', that brought the invention by Trevor Bayliss to the attention of South African entrepreneurs Rory Stear and Christopher Staines. Rory and Chris approached Hylton for

factory funding, which was forthcoming, but on the condition of our participation. Hence the fax to me in Australia. Hence the birth of the DEC Trust, set up to take a 50 percent stake in BayGen Power Manufacturing, or simply BayGen (from Bayliss Generator).

The Disability Employment Concerns Trust, popularly known as DEC, has two objectives, to generate income for its member organizations through business investment and to employ disabled persons in its enterprises. Seven participating organizations each nominate two representatives, at least one of whom must be disabled, to the trust, which in turn is served by special committees for investment, finance and audit, and remuneration. It will be of interest to note the seven national disability NGOs that are involved:

- Deaf Federation of South Africa
- Disabled People South Africa
- Epilepsy South Africa
- National Council for Persons with Physical Disabilities in South Africa
- South African Federation for Mental Health
- South African National Council for the Blind
- Thabo Mbeki Development Trust for Disabled People.

So BayGen was our first investment. Its wind-up radios and flashlights, with transparent casing, were innovative products, showcasing South African technology.

Of the 200 workers eventually employed, some 35 percent were disabled, an integrated workforce by design. The lowest wage earned by a BayGen worker was five times more than

the highest wage earned in a sheltered workshop. We paid industrial wages and workers shared in profits. This was the famed 'BayGen model' which had researchers, politicians, and celebrities beating a path to our door, to see what we were doing or to have their photographs taken.

Ultimately, though, the project foundered when our partners, without consultation, transferred manufacture to China, which for them made economic sense. While the retrenchment of loyal workers was hugely traumatic, DEC did exit with a little cash, and the press treated us fairly. My own assessment would be that the BayGen model was successful and remains viable, but that Y2K fears inflated demand for our wind-up products, creating market expectations that were unrealizable. But there was a social dividend: BayGen served as our empowerment platform, establishing DEC as a credible joint venture partner.

By this time our asset base had grown considerably. We had stakes in the radio station Classic FM and in a company managing diamond mines. We owned a piece of Adcorp, a company listed on the Johannesburg Securities Exchange (education sector) and we had been part of the winning consortium for the second free-to-air TV licence in the country. Anticipating later troubles, we had sold off our TV interest to advantage - and then came the big one ...

In any country the national lottery is likely to be one of the biggest and most lucrative businesses. 'A licence to print money' is how some would describe it - a gross exaggeration, with an element of truth. The request for proposals issued by the government therefore triggered a frenzy of activity, which soon presented DEC with a dilemma, or a trilemma, so to speak. Each of the three competing consortiums wanted our membership, but in choosing we had to weigh up

the generosity of the offer against the chance of winning. In the end we settled for Uthingo (meaning rainbow), comprising an assortment of South African business interests and international lottery companies, including G-Tech of America.

There followed an intensive campaign of lobbying and publicity, while the technical team prepared our bid. And then, many hurdles and 23 tons of paper later, D-day arrived.

A broker friend, Julie, monitored the stock market all day for a sign of the outcome. The media had predicted victory for the listed company Moribo, with Uthingo the runner-up. At three in the afternoon Julie called: 'I am looking at my computer screen,' she said. 'Moribo's share price has halved in the past five minutes!'

We were jubilant. We had won.

And so, each investment has its own story and anecdotes. But, ultimately, DEC is about people and their economic empowerment. In the beginning everything was done voluntarily, but as the deal flow increased and transactions grew more complex our position became untenable. It was at this point that we set up office at the Liberty Life Foundation and recruited Dr Samantha Naidoo as our first CEO. Her charm and business acumen expanded our network and drew in new partners. Then she departed for JP Morgan Bank and Mike du Toit, former Secretary General for DPSA, came on board.

No one in South Africa knows disability politics better than Mike du Toit. It was he who put in place our empowerment plan – to train a DEC core group, to deploy disabled persons into the businesses, and to school a cadre of men and women in economic concepts. Our moves in all these directions have been meaningful, but tentative, because until our

assets yield sizeable cash flows, expenditure has to be carefully contained.

And what about employment? Here our results have been mixed, but with some successes. It is as if the employment equity target of 2 percent has defined the upper limit. At Uthingo, though, disabled people have excelled at their work in the lottery call centres, while the Communications Manager is blind. At eTV a wheelchair user overcame severe accessibility problems to become the Compliance Officer. But the associated company that has outshone all the others is Fabkomp, a manufacturer of automotive parts, where 28 of the 107 permanent workers are disabled, and this in a rural area of one of our poorest provinces.

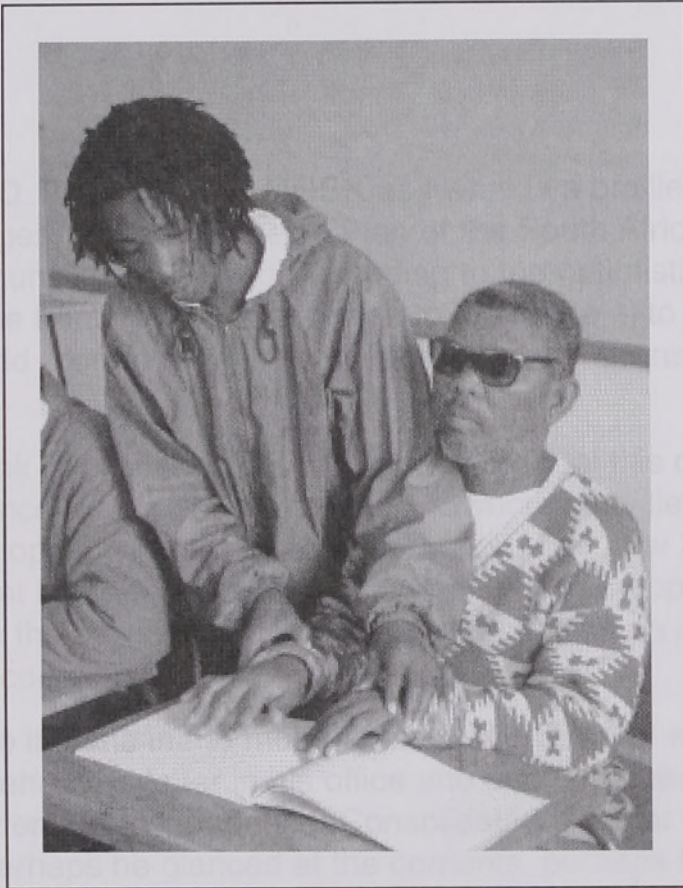
Why, some may ask, would banks and oil companies, lottery operators and pharmaceutical firms bother to consort with disabled people? And why would the likes of G-Tech or Daimler Chrysler want to do business with DEC?

Certainly there is an element of coercion and political correctness, but that's all right because it is of our own making. However, I do find more potent factors at work: the fact that we are organized, the fact that we are activist, the fact that we add value to corporate culture and public influence. And then at some indefinable point you attain critical mass and the process takes on its own momentum.

What better way to end this piece than with breaking news? Having just learned that our consortium Biovac has been contracted by government to supply the country with all vaccines for the next five years, I am enthused by the fact that this disability investment will also be helping to prevent disability.

chapter 4

project renewal



As a result of Project Renewal, the SANCB successfully established Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) Centres in the Free State, Limpopo and Northern Cape.

Next to me on the desk as I write is a braille volume of 73 pages. It is the Strategic Plan of the South African National Council for the Blind. According to the optimistic wording on the front cover it is 'a bridge to the future' – to which I would add - for an organization seeking its own transformation.

I can think of only one other document to equal this one in its significance for the sector, but the two documents lie at the extreme opposite poles of policy direction. The new Stratplan document is the product of consultation and self-appraisal, whereas the other document I have in mind was an instrument of coercion.

I imagine it came in the morning mail. The Director would have opened the letter in his office and seen another piece of government correspondence: Consolidated Circular No. 29 of 1966. Perhaps he glanced at the contents, perhaps he put it aside for later. Maybe he referred it to a colleague. We'll never know, but of one thing I am sure, my predecessor's predecessor at that moment could not have foreseen the generation of injustice to come from that document, rein-

forced from time to time over the next fifteen years by further 'circulars'.

Circular No 29 was issued by the Department of Welfare and Pensions in concurrence with – to use the language of the day – the Departments of Bantu Administration and Development, Coloured Affairs, Indian Affairs, and others. It stated government policy unequivocally: 'It is intended that non-white welfare organizations for the various racial groups should develop alongside of white organizations. In the course of time they will advance to a level of complete independence when they will be quite capable of managing their own affairs.'

Such directives were not handed down into a vacuum. By 1966 Apartheid was well on the way to being institutionalized and in that year also the most infamous piece of legislation was passed into law by the all-white parliament, the Group Areas Act, finally determining where South Africans could live and the ways in which they could associate with one another.

At the SANCB separate Divisions for Coloured and Indian Blind were created, as well as a special Committee for Blind Blacks. Efforts were made to extend services via these parallel channels, but as the quantum of resources was unchanged the effect was negligible. General services, such as employment placement, remained open to all, but the rehabilitation centre, being residential, admitted whites only. A workshop employing blind black workers in a white urban area was transferred to a remote 'homeland' location and a SANCB affiliate serving Coloured and Indian blind persons around Johannesburg was forced to split into two organizations, one with money and no infrastructure and the other with an infrastructure but no money. And following his detention under the Suppression of Communism Act, the name of

the Reverend Arthur Blaxall, Vice-President of the SANCB, was quietly removed from the letterhead.

But why did people yield to such pressures? Was it out of expediency or conviction? Or were there other reasons?

At this distance in time it is easy to condemn and hard to explain. But the fact is that people seemingly of principle did implement this policy, even while engaging in desultory negotiations to get it changed. The government, though, was more decisive in its actions, as is clear from the examples we have given. When 'non-whites' attended meetings, government officials simply withdrew. More insidious was the threat that state subsidies could be withheld, or even registration to operate and raise funds. Personal fear of the consequences of stepping out of line would also have been a potent factor.

To change all of this, and much more, into something else that was inclusive and just, functional and developmental, could never have been a project in isolation. South African society itself had to change and this required new and different forces. And such forces were latent, but it was to take an oppressive act of a particular kind to unleash them. This was the decree by the Minister of Bantu Education, MC Botha, making Afrikaans a compulsory medium of instruction in Black schools. A youth march to protest was brutally attacked by the police and within hours Soweto was burning. The youth uprising had begun, and the final phase of the liberation struggle.

At the SANCB the first major step towards normality was taken in 1981 with the removal of all references to race from the constitution. Four years later, when Optima College in Pretoria replaced the old Enid Whitaker Rehabilitation Centre in Johannesburg, it was opened to all races. The establish-

ment of a Development Division gave support to the emergent self-help movement in which blind and other disabled persons everywhere were forming worker co-operatives to create self-employment, and when in 1993 Ruth Machobane was elected as Vice-Chairman, she became the first blind African to hold senior office in the organization.

The opening up of Optima College, it has to be said, did not happen without trepidation. Would there be ugly racial incidents? Would people refuse to come to Optima, or simply not apply?

A single anonymous letter and some graffiti were the sole signs of resistance. And very soon black and white students were to be seen strolling up and down the corridors arm in arm and studying and joking together, quite naturally.

These were indeed positive developments, but in our divided society this very fact gave further cause to some for suspicion and mistrust, as I would discover from personal experience. The attack came in the form of a letter addressed to the Executive Committee of the SANCB claiming that my 'leftist' politics were harming the organization. A motion of no confidence was put to the vote and decisively defeated, but had the true extent of my activism in the disability rights movement been known to my immediate colleagues, or had they been aware of my secret visit to London to clear the way with the ANC for the entry of DPSA into DPI, I might have been in much bigger trouble.

But worse was to follow. As civil resistance grew in the country and rolling mass action took hold, some of the anger of the people was turned against traditional institutions. Blind persons marched through the streets holding up placards accusing the SANCB of racism, thrusting me into the anomalous position of a defender of the organization in harrowing

press interviews, while in other forums I was taking the attack to the government as leader of DPSA.

The financial collapse of the Ezenzeleni Workshop, one of the SANCB affiliates, triggered the culminating confrontation. An invasion of our premises by close on 100 blind workers and trade unionists plunged us into three days of unrelenting chaos, as on the one hand, our negotiating team sat through round after round of fruitless talks, while, on the other hand, I held out against the demands of my Executive to call in the police. Never shall I forget the scene in our offices of the workers, with bared torsos, pounding the boardroom table and chanting 'Kill the Farmer! Kill the Boer!' and my secretary fleeing in terror.

In the end the police did intervene, removing the workers to the train station; but they returned and the process repeated itself, with me refusing to lay formal charges. The reward for my part in these proceedings was a scorching reprimand from my bosses for not having taken firmer action.

Almost certainly this incident would have continued to haunt us down the years had it not been for the foresight of one of our more perceptive Executive Committee members, Philip Bam. It was Philip who proposed that the SANCB, although it had no legal obligation to do so, make financial reparations to the workers. There is, too, an historical footnote to this unfortunate episode: a very successful self-help project, Ubuntu (humanity), emerged from that situation with the support of the SANCB and today that group of workers in its own right has become a fully-fledged affiliate of our organization.

But effective change cannot depend on haphazard events alone. At some point a systematic process has to take over.

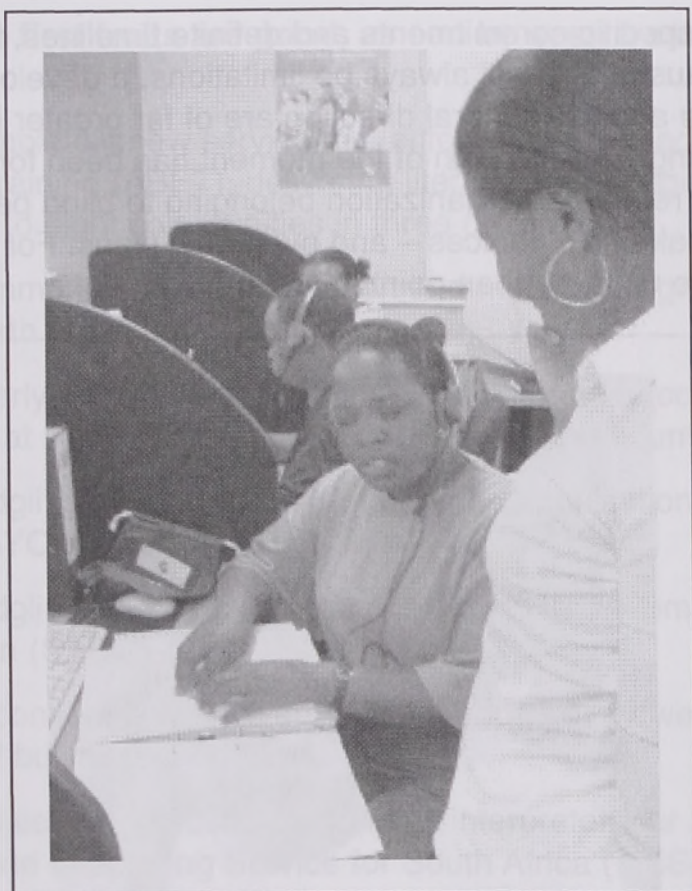
The first step was to draft another constitution for the SANCB to take advantage of the devolution of government under the

new South African Constitution and to ensure greater representivity, especially for blind people. The idea of having nine provincial sub-structures was embraced enthusiastically, but the entrenchment of a blind majority in the decision making bodies of the organization seemed offensive to some and unnecessary to others. Today, several years on, it seems hard to believe that blind people themselves felt the provision to call into question their ability to lead, but that is how it was at the end of a stormy debate at that watershed 1995 conference as the motion was taken to the narrowest of votes – 76 in favour, 72 against.

However, something that was even more far-reaching was on the way.

At the 33rd Biennial Conference of the SANCB (Durban; October 1997) delegates resolved that the organization should re-evaluate its services and programmes. We in management saw in this the opportunity to conceptualize a comprehensive transformation programme – the word process would have been more accurate – which was to last longer and cut deeper than anything we could have envisaged. This became known as Project Renewal and it was carried out in three phases:

- Phase 1: Provincial consultations involving representatives of the affiliated organizations as well as blind persons in the community;
- Phase 2: Evaluation of SANCB services and programmes; and
- Phase 3: Analysis of some sixty critical issues by Strategic Focus Groups (SFG's). The SFG reports in turn gave substance to an interim implementation plan, impacting on the internal workings of the organization, which was



The SANCB launched Call Centre Training for blind and partially sighted people in 2003. Its business venture, Opticall, provides employment opportunities for blind and partially sighted people in this sector.

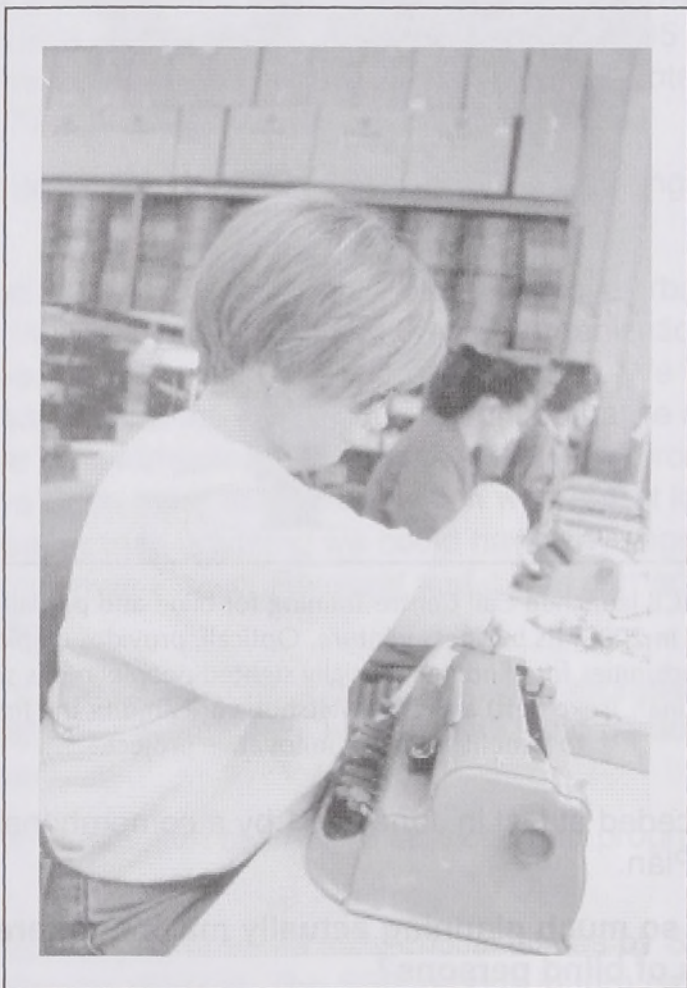
Linah Tseke (left) and Zola Matshoba are among the first to benefit from this innovative project.

superceded at last in June 2001 by a comprehensive Strategic Plan.

But can so much planning actually make a difference in the lives of blind persons?

Of course it can, with sustained effort, with committed people, and with enough resources. I fully acknowledge the impor-

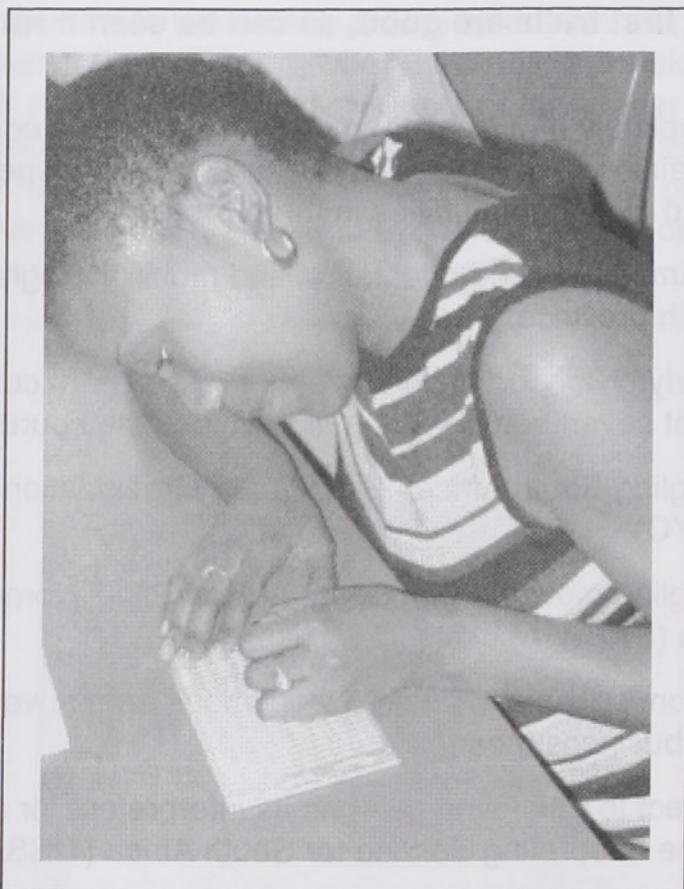
tance of specific commitments and definite timelines, but to me, because there will always be limitations, a developmental culture and the general direction are of far greater importance. Long after the plan of the moment has been forgotten, there will remain an organization belonging to blind people able to make new choices – and even new plans. For now we can do no more than point to first fruits.



The integrated workforce at the Perkins Braille factory in Cape Town includes blind and other disabled persons. Here Ilana Hermes, who is deafblind, meticulously assembles a Perkins Braille.

And the first fruits are good, as can be seen from the list below:

- A completely new service model for adult basic education and training (ABET), delivering literacy and independence skills to eight communities in three provinces;
- A community-based orientation and mobility programme in a fourth province;
- An early childhood development programme to co-ordinate work at seventeen service points across the country
- A fledgling South African Blind Youth Organization (SABYO);
- A fledgling movement of South African Blind Women In Action (SABWIA);
- The conversion of sheltered workshops from a welfare to a small business model;
- A project to train blind persons as interpreters for a Telephone Interpreting Service for South Africa (TISSA);
- An enterprise to train blind operatives for employment in call centres;
- A new department for Advocacy and Government Relations within the SANCB;
- A specialized Education Desk within the SANCB;
- An Eye Care Information Centre within the SANCB;
- A facility to assemble Perkins Braille, reducing the unit cost by 40%;
- The manufacture of a South African braille writing frame, reducing the unit cost to one-tenth of the imported product;



The SANCB produces the Optima Braille Slate at one-tenth of the import price. The objective of this project is to promote braille literacy in the developing world.

- And, via the Bureau for the Prevention of Blindness - a wing of the SANCB – the Right to Sight Campaign to eliminate the immense cataract surgery backlog in the country.

Other major initiatives will have to await government or other funding:

- An education support service for schools;
- A country-wide employment development service; and

- A 'development node' to pilot a CBR programme, linked to the existing ABET programme, in our poorest province.

It has to be emphasised that these are modest initiatives supplementing an existing network of services and programmes provided by the SANCB and its affiliates. They are, however, a purposeful response to expressed needs and specifically intended to reach out beyond urban populations. These initiatives are not the making of the SANCB alone, but depend on a whole series of new partnerships and special relationships with government, other organizations, and, in some cases, even with commercial companies.

Is there, finally, any test that could be applied at some point in the future to measure the success, or otherwise, of all these efforts?

Indeed there is, and it is one acknowledged as critical in all reconstruction and development work in South Africa. It is the extent to which previously disadvantaged individuals become empowered to take charge of their own lives and participate in their communities. It seems to me that this must be the thrust of each and every initiative, even at the cost of beloved flagship programmes of the past.



Ferial Letabane, Zihana Letabane, and Cypri Leungu
lead morning prayer at Tlokweng