

STATEMENT BY MR JOSH TSENG,
INTERVENTION AT ROUNDTABLE 3: “PROMOTING THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS
WITH DISABILITIES TO DECENT WORK AND SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD”
AT THE 17TH CONFERENCE OF STATE PARTIES TO THE CONVENTION ON THE
RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
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Introduction

Mr / Mdm Chair,

I am honoured to share my views today on this topic that is close to my heart. When I lost my eyesight at the age of 16 ten years ago, inclusive employment for people with disabilities was hardly a term anyone knew or cared about. A doctor even told me that my blindness from childhood glaucoma meant I had no hope of furthering my studies and that one of my only available career options was to be a massage therapist. To be told that's your only option at age 16 – I thought my vision impairment meant my life was over, and that I was destined for failure because of my disability.

But I'm fortunate to live in a time when inclusion and independent living for persons with disabilities are issues our governments and societies are increasingly addressing.

Today, I'll share with you what we've learned in Singapore from our efforts to make inclusive employment possible for people with disabilities. Some of the initiatives we've successfully implemented, but there are also some gaps that we have yet to address.

Part 1: Employment

First, we need to talk about how we can get people with disabilities gainful employment in the first place.

At a national level, our goals for people with disabilities are outlined in Singapore's Enabling Masterplan 2030. It is a roadmap to chart our path forward on important areas of creating a truly inclusive society, spanning areas including accessible infrastructure, healthcare, recreation, and yes, employment.

Our aim is to elevate the employment rate of persons with disabilities to 40% by 2030. Despite challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been fortunate enough to make progress in this area. The employment rate of resident persons with disabilities aged 15 to 64 has risen from 28.2% in 2019 to 32.7% in 2023.

One major factor for this success has been the employment-related programmes instituted by the government. One such initiative is the Open Door Programme, launched in 2014 and enhanced in 2020. Through job placement and job support services under this programme, persons with disabilities receive free job coaching and matching, as well as post-placement support for up to one year. The government shoulders these costs, ensuring no financial burden on individuals.

This same Open Door Programme also provides aid to employers, through substantial training grants and job redesign grants. These grants cover up to 90% of training costs for supervisors and co-workers, equipping them with the skills to effectively integrate and support employees with disabilities.

These measures reduce the friction and hesitation employers might have about hiring people with disabilities. Perceptions that people with disabilities are "difficult", or "more expensive to accommodate" are still present in

Singapore. In a 2019 survey, whilst 58% of respondents had positive attitudes towards persons with disabilities in the workplace, 42% still had neutral or negative attitudes. We therefore see the need for schemes such as the Open Door Programme that help reduce the upfront costs related to onboarding people with disabilities, getting them into jobs and changing perceptions that people with disabilities cannot perform at the workplace.

Part 2: Skills Training

Speaking of performance at the workplace, we cannot talk about employment without addressing the employability of people with disabilities. Simply put, people with disabilities will never be able to perform at their jobs if they cannot access the appropriate training and education to develop relevant skills.

Through SkillsFuture Singapore, our national skills training initiative, there are a growing number of offerings for customized courses with enhanced subsidies for persons with disabilities. Grants are also provided to encourage training providers to customize courses that meet the needs of persons with disabilities. These courses empower individuals to remain employable and pivot to new career opportunities, particularly in growth sectors such as media and technology. To subsidise the cost of upskilling and training, all Singaporeans, people with disabilities included, receive an opening credit of SGD 500 (about USD 370) at age 25 which can be used to offset the cost of courses accredited under the SkillsFuture programme.

Building on these efforts, last year Singapore introduced a new initiative, the pilot Enabling Business Hub by SG Enable. It is built close to residential areas to bring training and employment opportunities closer to home for

persons with disabilities. The Hub provides comprehensive employment-related services and matches individuals to jobs based on their skills and interests.

Part 3: Areas for Improvement

However, despite our progress, there are still areas where we must strive to improve.

There is a need to increase awareness and understanding among employers about the benefits of hiring persons with disabilities. More needs to be done to dismantle stereotypes and overcome biases that still exist. For example, in a 2019 survey in Singapore of public attitudes towards persons with disabilities, older and less educated respondents tended to think that persons with disabilities could do only simpler jobs.

The accessibility of lifelong education programs needs constant review and enhancement. We must ensure that the courses offered are not only available but also truly accessible, accommodating various types of disabilities.

People with disabilities also need the appropriate training and access to assistive technologies which can benefit them at the workplace. More can be done to improve assistive technology literacy amongst persons with disabilities, schools and employers.

Beyond tracking job placements and employment rates, which is a one-dimensional approach to viewing employment, we also need to ensure that people with disabilities can attain career mobility, progression, and satisfaction.

Conclusion

From Singapore's experience of promoting disability inclusive employment, it is a long journey and we need many partners along the way, including governments, businesses, disability organisations, and people with disabilities ourselves. Personally, I'm currently in the process of building a new company which was founded last year, and my team and I are looking forward to embarking on a journey of inclusive employment ourselves over the coming years.

I urge CRPD Member States to take the lead in forging these partnerships to ensure that persons with disabilities are able to work and be recognised for their abilities.

Thank you.