

## CHAPTER 1

# Definition of Disability and Prevalence Rate of Persons with Disabilities in Singapore

## INTRODUCTION

1. The definition of disability and the determination of the disability prevalence rate are important in framing any discussion on disability in Singapore.

## DEFINITION OF DISABILITY

2. The 1988 Advisory Council for the Disabled (ACD), chaired by the then Minister for Education, Dr. Tony Tan, defined persons with disabilities (PWDs) as “those whose prospects of securing, retaining places and advancing in education and training institutions, employment and recreation as equal members of the community are substantially reduced as a result of physical, sensory and intellectual impairments”. The ACD formulated this definition by examining existing international definitions. One source was the International Labour Organisation’s 1983 recommendation on Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment of Disabled Persons. Another source was the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) interpretation of impairment, disability and handicap in 1980.

3. In 2004, the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) refined the ACD’s definition to include “developmental” disability. The definition of PWDs henceforth became “***those whose prospects of securing, retaining places and advancing in education and training institutions, employment and recreation as equal members of the community are substantially reduced as a result of physical, sensory, intellectual and developmental impairments***”. This is Singapore’s current definition.

### ***Medical and Socio-Functional Approach***

4. The Committee notes that there are two components in Singapore’s definition:

- a. The core definition<sup>1</sup> of what constitutes disability; and

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<sup>1</sup> The core definition takes after a medical model. Specifically, physical disabilities include impairments such as amputations and the effects of polio; sensory disabilities are defined as hearing impairment with the loss of hearing for sounds below 12 decibels, and visual impairment with eye-test scores of less than 3/60 (blindness) or less than 6/18 (low vision); intellectual disabilities are defined as those with an IQ of 70 & below; and other developmental disorders

- b. The level of functionality of the person, not only by medical standards, but more holistically with regard to his overall social functionality.

5. The Committee examined the current definition used by Singapore against the prevailing definitions used by other countries and also by international organisations. Two apparent approaches were observed: a medical definition and a socio-functional definition of disability. The medical definition is based strictly on a medical diagnosis. It is highly objective. However, it has been criticised for promoting the view of a disabled person as dependent and needing to be cured or cared for.

6. The Committee observes that under the socio-functional approach, disability is viewed as a result of physical, institutional and attitudinal barriers present within society. The model accepts that PWDs are part of the economic, environmental and cultural society. These barriers prevent an individual from integrating into society. The WHO adopts this model under the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health 2002 framework.

7. The Committee notes that Singapore's current definition uses the medical criteria as the base, and builds on top of that, an examination of the socio-functional limitations. The Committee endorses such a definition. The medical perspective ensures sufficient rigour in determining what constitutes a disability while the socio-functional perspective emphasises the need to address economic, environmental and cultural barriers.

### ***Inclusion of Developmental Disabilities***

8. The Committee endorses the expansion in Singapore's definition of disability since 2004 to include developmental disabilities. This is in keeping with international trends given the rise in the cases of developmental disabilities worldwide. The American Community Survey<sup>2</sup> did not include a category on developmental definitions in its 1996-1998 Survey. It was subsequently introduced in the 1999-2001 Survey. The rise in developmental disabilities in Singapore has been most notable for autism spectrum disorders (ASD).

## **PREVALENCE OF DISABILITY IN SINGAPORE**

9. Collecting statistics of the number of PWDs in Singapore has remained a challenge till today. The Committee notes that as of July 2006, about 9,000

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include examples such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD).

<sup>2</sup> The American Community Survey is a new nationwide survey designed to provide communities a fresh look at how they are changing. It is a critical element in the Census Bureau's re-engineered 2010 census plan.

PWDs were using government-funded services. This does not form a reliable base upon which to determine prevalence rates. The last attempt by MCYS and the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) to size up the issue ended when the Central Registry of Disabled Persons closed in 1987. It became a register of users of disability services, rather than a full register of PWDs. There are still difficulties in ensuring that a central registry will work today. PWDs who do not access government or NCSS funded services would not have an incentive to register. Also, there is the problem of keeping the register up-to-date.

10. There have been attempts to use the disability prevalence rates of other countries as proxies of the prevalence rate for Singapore. The Committee would caution against such an approach. Definitions of disabilities vary widely among countries. Hence the prevalence rates of other countries do not provide a reliable benchmark for Singapore.

11. The Committee tried to get at the possible disability prevalence rates for Singapore by examining different cohorts over the years (refer to Annex 1-1). However, the figures are not robust across the different cohorts.

12. The most robust data is that for the pre-school cohort (0-6 years old). About 1,400 children are diagnosed annually to have patterns of developmental problems. This is about 3.2% of the cohort annually. However, this is not a prevalence rate as there could be children who are not diagnosed. Furthermore, we could not extrapolate this rate to the older cohorts. Thus, we could not arrive at the prevalence rate of disability in Singapore.

## CONCLUSION

13. The Committee is of the view that it is important to know the prevalence rate of disability in Singapore. **We recommend that MCYS conduct a study to determine the prevalence rate**, including possibly conducting a national census or survey. The Committee endorses the current definition of disability in Singapore. However, the definition should be periodically reviewed to ensure it remains relevant and up-to-date.