

Picture Story



Beyond the horizon . . .

Sameera Senanayake¹ & Manuja N Perera²

¹Epidemiology Unit, Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka; ²Department of Public Health, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.4038/jccpsl.v23i1.8110>



Photograph: Sameera Senanayake¹

This photograph depicts a middle-aged man with limited mobility looking over the horizon near Negombo, Sri Lanka. According to the Population Census of 2012, the number of individuals currently living with mobility impairment in Sri Lanka is 734,213. Thus, if you consider 100 Sri Lankan citizens, four of them find it difficult to walk about to engage in day-to-day activities and enjoy life. Further, majority of them are over 35 year males, as the individual portrayed in our cover picture, with the need of providing for their families (1). Local evidence reveal that persons living with mobility impairment have less opportunities for education and employment in Sri Lanka, making them more vulnerable for poverty (2).

Persons living with mobility impairment are unique when compared to persons with other impairments. The only factor that prevents them enjoying life as much as a person having no issue with mobility, is limited access, or in most settings, not having access. Thus, when compared to persons without disabilities or mobility impairments, their 'horizons' can be much narrower and confined to an uncondusive environment. In the broader sense of public health, environment of a person living with disability is not only the physical environment consisting of disability friendly buildings, transport facilities and road networks. It also incorporates the intangible socio-cultural aspects such as norms and values

of the communities in which they live; the societal norms on how 'equally' the persons living with disabilities should be treated and the value placed by the policy makers and their advocates on the well-being of such persons.

Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act and the National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka highlight several issues that need to be addressed in making environments more conducive for persons living with disabilities, which go beyond improving physical access. For example, providing equal opportunities for education, to function independently and to contribute to the development of the country is seen as a fundamental necessity (2, 3). However, when the simple scenario of school education of a child with mobility impairment is considered, having equal opportunities call out for schools with disability friendly infrastructure. Further, if we consider the individual in our picture story, most physical settings of his day-to-day life including places for recreational activities and worship, do not acknowledge his limited mobility.

Sri Lanka has taken great first steps in the country's

journey to broaden the horizons of persons living with disabilities. Several years have passed after the Supreme Court judgment, reminding the country the need to improve physical access for people living with disabilities. However, the development of the infrastructure to be more disable-friendly seems to be comparatively slow in pace. Thus, while pressing for improving the physical environment, it is also important that we aim to broaden the horizons of the society, to accept and value the potential of persons living with impairments so they face least barriers in their unique pathways to progress.

References

1. Department of Census and Statistics. Census of population and housing 2012: Final Report. Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics, 2015.
2. Ministry of Social Welfare. National policy on disability for Sri Lanka. Colombo: Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003.
3. Parliament of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. Protection of the rights of persons with disabilities Act, No. 28.1996. Colombo: Department of Government Printing, Sri Lanka, 1996.