

## **Hendrietta Ipeleng Bogopane-Zulu**

Amongst the yardsticks by which to measure a society's respect for human rights, to evaluate its level of maturity and generosity of spirit is done by looking at the state's benefits to those who have less in society and who are most vulnerable, the senior citizens, the disabled people and its children.

I will not be covering much parliamentary jargon, except to say that I think in the area of ICT, we'd be the best partner to share practically best practices because South Africa is the only parliament in the world that I can proudly say that has 20 members of Parliament with different disabilities in the national assembly. The day we walked down the corridor path, we brought with us diversity and a lot of talent for the management of Parliament and also for politics in South Africa, and it's also important for me to indicate that we didn't get there by quota, but by actually by being politicians in our own right. One of the members of our Parliament is deaf, and one of the issues was where will sign language interpreter sit? Does he take an oath? There were other realities of accessibility in terms of engaging with other members as we talk across each other. One of the members asked a very simple question, and that is "but how is she going to howl at others when everybody howls," because that's the standard parliamentary practice. The response was, "well, let's get ICTs to solve our problems," and so we did. The second part was that, in terms of Parliament, the way parliaments do business is that you really have a lot to read in a day to prepare to your next meeting or just to get communication on most of the parliamentary issues. Communication is paper-based, and as a visually impaired person, you can imagine that means I need a large office to capture and store all of these things in Braille, if it is to be in Braille, but you also need the time to read it. Once again, we had to call on ICTs to solve our problem.

The other aspect that I should cover is that our Parliament is basically a very huge institution, and some members of Parliament come from rural areas with no electricity and do not use motorized wheelchairs. Parliament had to look at how you get there on time, and from a meeting from one end of the parliament to the other end, because using

a regular wheelchair will get you there by the end of the meeting. The short time between meetings was also another aspect, but that is not the only thing. There is also a question of access and availability of these ICTs, and affordability is really to be aware in terms of the challenges that surround the realities of a lot of developing countries. The other aspect was also the question of availability. Where do we get these specialized computers? Whenever technology changed, we worried if it was compatible with accessibility programs, because every time Parliament introduces a new system, they are expecting the question from us, “is it compatible with JAWS?” Half the time it’s not. Despite us asking the question 150 times, it just doesn’t come automatically. We have to constantly remind them.

The other aspect of everything else that has been said is the question of training. As a rural girl who has gone to a school for the blind in a rural area with no electricity and then ended up in Parliament, it’s also the reality of that background that I didn’t know how to use a computer. Luckily, I have always been passionate about computers and made it a priority to learn to use them. There are, however, three members of parliament with visual impairment, and two of them have never even worked with computers. In attempting to solve our problems, it is all computer-based. As I have indicated, if we have to do our research, to prepare for our speeches, we need to get into the internet and try to make it accessible. Because of affordability, we have to choose, and Parliament was saying, “do you want the talking computer or do you want a human being?” We can’t pay for the computer, it’s too expensive; it’s 50,000.00 when it’s converted, everything has to be imported, and now we also have to pay the salary for an industry person. Which one will it be? We have to make sure that in the process of all of these transformations and the process of us using ICTs, that we don’t create a notion that ICT can replace human touch because it can’t. Unfortunately, the talking computer cannot walk you from one meeting room to the other, so it took our presiding officers a lot of work to understand that as we advance ICTs, we are actually not getting rid of personal assistants for people with different disabilities.

During the sessions of Parliament, which are based on sound, the question is “what about those who are deaf?” Therefore, the whole Parliament had to become a construction site because of the bleeping light that’s going to bring attention that it’s time to begin the session. Telephones were introduced around Parliament, and not only around Parliament, but across all of them in various centers. These were also installed with a blinking light so that one can tell that it is ringing.

I hope that as the global forum grows, as it interacts with partnerships, that the notion that legislation is the beginning and the end will not be created. Half the time it’s very easy, especially for member states, to comply with UN treaties and conventions, but you comply by establishing domestic legislation when it’s your part of legislation. When the UN requires you to report on whether or not you have disability legislation, and the truth is that although the parliamentarians have done their tasks, they’ve never allocated resources to this piece of legislation; they actually never even put in place in any framework that’s going to monitor the implementation, then they don’t even know where that legislation is from the day that they passed it. In the process of all of this, as we develop these ICTs, we need to not forget that.

The other thing is that industry needs to also put in place such targets and standards that take reality into consideration; a lot of the standards don’t take into consideration the reality from developing countries, and in most instances they come as an imposed standard, and the developing countries don’t implement them. Therefore, I hope that in a number of initiatives, developing countries are going to be involved right at the beginning and not at the end so that standards have actually taken the realities of developing countries into account.

There’s a lot that can be done in terms of legislation, policies, regulations in creating an access to ICTs. I always tell people that I have two visually impaired girls, and if the three of us left in the house, I realized that we live in this house, but we can’t even turn the toaster on. Everything is touch-based, and I hope that industries will begin to network with organizations for disabled people. In South Africa, we have used our buying power

to ensure that industry listens to us. One typical example is that we have three mobile network providers, and at this stage we decided that as an activity towards the build-up of the International Day for People with Disabilities, we would engage with Cell C, Vodacom and MTN. The questions were very simple, to say which one of them is prepared to engage in work with us in developing accessible cell phones and related issues. They didn't take us seriously, and we actually had to make them understand that for whichever company is ready to work with us, we're not only ourselves, but our families and our associates. Vodacom was the first company to actually say, "let's engage with people with disabilities and you can become our consultant in ensuring that you identify your special needs." Now, Vodacom is one of the most successful providers because of what we did, and as soon as Vodacom worked it out, and we became their consultant for disabled people in creating an accessible environment, we made sure that we created the level of awareness within our own networks and organizations to have everyone switch to Vodacom. Today, you can get SMS-based support system when your cell phone doesn't work. Not a lot of deaf people can develop access to that. There is a specialized consultant that specifically addresses issues of specialized needs for people with disabilities. We are now working with Nokia and some of those who actually bring the cost down.

There are issues surrounding procurement, and I think government has a specific role to create an enabling environment and preferential procurement for those companies that actually respect accessibility. As those standards are being developed, it is also very important for industry to also ensure that people with disabilities, especially in developing countries, are considered. As you benefit from the preferential procurement, you must also employ people with disabilities and train them as designers and programmers.

In conclusion, in our house, we are the majority, and so everything is done the blind way. There are only two sighted people, and the selection of toys that my three-year old, who is also visually-impaired, needs to play with to have accessibility are all ICT-based. This is what they said I must conclude with. They said I must say that "the greater our

diversity, the richer our capacity to create new vision, the acknowledgement of our differences and the need to celebrate them as capacities rather than deficiencies. Life must be excellent to live fully. It may be painful, but the inquiry can be the beginning of a new personal future. You owe us a debt of gratitude as we present you with this magnitude of change. Hence, welcoming us in your world will not be simply for our own benefit, it will also be for your own.” I have never been in a forum where disability has referred to aging. It makes even more sense, and I hope that we can make everything accessible so that we retire in greatness.

### **Press Conference**

#### **Hendrietta Ipeleng Bogopane-Zulu, Chairperson, South African Parliament at the National Assembly**

Most of the time, when we talk about ICTs, the first thing that comes to mind is computers. For us as Africans, computers are a luxury. It's a necessity for us to survive, but the realities and the challenges that we have to even access electricity, a computer becomes a very secondary.

As a visually impaired parliamentarian, for me to function at the same level with my peers, I would obviously rely on computers to be able to get to my speech on time, to be able to do the research, to be able to cope with the pressures of being a politician and being competent. That's one of the realities that we have. Also, as a mother of two visually impaired girls, I think of the technologies in my kitchen, getting my daughters ready for school, the access to the microwave, the basics like being able to do my washing, all of these realities tend to be forgotten. It is those realities that I would bring to this forum, and to remind you of the realities of the digital divide that still exist, not only among people with disabilities and those that are non-disabled, but among the developed and developing countries, and to also remind the developed world that over and above the access to the web, the access to the other things. The reality of Africans in a developing country is basically for the ability. It is not just about the access of it; it is also the affordability, the support systems, and the training in order to be able to use the technology. It is all of those issues brought into one.

I use JAWS, for example, and it is very expensive because it is dollar-based. It has to be imported, and when the money is converted it becomes unaffordable, and that has a large impact on the employment of people with disabilities, especially those that are visually impaired and rely heavily on technology to be able to function. Those are some of the realities that I bring into the global forum. In the world of the digital divide, you also have affordability, accessibility, and disability in the whole debate.