UNIVERSAL ACCESS: THE FIRST PILLAR TO EMPOWERMENT

IN THE SECOND ARTICLE OF A SERIES ON IMPLEMENTING THE WHITE PAPER ON THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES, I TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT HOW REMOVING BARRIERS TO ACCESS PLAYS A ROLE IN EMPOWERING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

*T*he first Empowerment Pillar of the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (WPRPD) is "removing barriers to access and participation". It focuses on accessing built environments (buildings), transport, information, communications and universal access.

The WPRPD is a strategic document that should be used to leverage the economic empowerment of people with disabilities, as it relates to skills development and realising employment and entrepreneurship of people with disabilities. Without adequate access and participation in society, people with disabilities would be greatly "disabled" to achieve their true potential.

ACCESS TO THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

It is important to ensure that people with disabilities have access to buildings. This can be done by conducting universal design audits of existing infrastructure to establish the degree of compliance with the SABS minimum norms and standards for use by people with disabilities.

ACCESS TO TRANSPORT

Inaccessible public and private transport systems are a major barrier to the right to equality for people with disabilities. The link between the home, transport and the workplace or social services is frequently overlooked. It is important that access to transport be viewed across the entire travel value chain, including:
- Planning a trip, including access to information;
- Getting to pick-up points and negotiating foot or cycle paths;
- Getting onto the transport mode of choice and being able to transfer; and
- Providing feedback on the trip.

ACCESS TO INFO AND COMMUNICATION

When information and communication platforms and technology are available, affordable and accessible, they significantly improve the inclusion of people with disabilities.

UNIVERSAL ACCESS

There are two primary forms of universal access to consider, namely direct and indirect access. Direct access strongly relates to universal design and refers to direct adaptations to products, environments, services or system to improve their accessibility.

Indirect access is the use of assistive devices and technology. It refers to the product, environment, service or system interfaces that enable an add-on assistive technology to provide the user with full access. A job seeker with a disability will not be able to get to work if they have barriers to access and participation. Access is a form of reasonable accommodation for the employee.

"Reasonable accommodation measures are therefore inclusive of assistive devices, technology, personal assistance, adaptations of the environment, signage, alarm systems for evacuation procedures, adaptation of the work environment, and the implementation of flexibility within the workplace," according to the WPRPD.

Without the removal of barriers, people with disabilities become more "disabled". Let's enable the disabled by removing the barriers and providing the necessary reasonable accommodation. *R*

Rustim Ariefdien is a disability expert extraordinaire, who assists businesses to "let the Ability of disAbility enAble their profitAbility" through BBBEE, skills development, employment equity and socio-economic development. He ensures that businesses are able to maximise their points on the BBBEE scorecard and become compliant with legislative requirements as stipulated in the Employment Equity and Skills Development Acts. His purpose is the economic empowerment of persons with disability in Africa. As a person with a disability himself, he has extensive experience in the development and empowerment of persons with disability.