

DISABILITY INCLUSION THROUGH SKILLS DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THE TOURISM INDUSTRY IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

Disability inclusion in tourism through skills development is an emerging research area, but little is known about the antecedents, experiences, employer prejudices, and post-training outcomes of such interventions. This article examines the lived experiences of disabled persons' training endeavors in rural tourism value chain, representing five different sub-sectors: hotel, restaurant, travel, tour guide, and bakery products. The theoretical framework is guided by the human development model of disability, and the case study approach is employed to illicit information on key constraints affecting skills development of persons with disabilities (PWDs) living in underdeveloped districts of a developing economy. The findings confirm that skills development of PWDs is an effective strategy to create a more inclusive and equitable society. In addition to PWD trainees' perseverance and determination, supportive roles of the family members, peers, communities, and employers emerge as vital factors in promoting human development of PWDs. In the area of training, the application of modern training methodologies with the support of reasonable adjustment models are equally important in facilitating PWD training and imparting employable skills. The findings also suggest that labour- and service- intensive industry sectors such as rural tourism offer significant potential for promoting disability inclusion through skills development. This article contributes to academic and policy debates about disability inclusion through skills development, particularly in economically disadvantaged regions of developing economies.

Keywords: Disability inclusion, Human development, Skills development, Tourism value chain.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Research on disability inclusion (DI) through skills development in the tourism industry is gaining prominence

ce, especially in the context of developing economies. Tourism has a high capacity to absorb labour, especially benefiting vulnerable groups like women and people with disabilities (PWDs). The current literature on the skills development of PWDs is fragmented, with notable gaps particularly in relation to diversity and inclusion in skills development. This paper is an attempt to fill this information gap based on the experience of a skills development project designed to promote inclusive growth with a special focus on disability and gender inclusion in the tourism industry.

Sri Lanka is an upper middle-income economy (per capita income of US\$ 4670) confronted with major economic problems such as low economic growth (e.g. -1.3 percent per year

between 2018 and 2023), low female participation, high level of educated youth unemployment, skill gaps and labour shortages, low productivity, high level of accumulated debts (both domestic and foreign), fiscal deficits and balance of payments problems. Under such economic conditions, individuals with disabilities face multiple obstacles such as systemic and socio-economic disparities, restricted access to education and training, inadequate information and awareness on training opportunities, physical and psychological challenges, and perceptions and attitudes of employers, all of which can hinder PWD participation in skills development programs.

This paper aims to address two research questions: a) What are the dominant factors affecting PWD participation in the workforce? and b) How to promote disability inclusion in tourism through skills development? We propose to employ Human Development Model of Disability as the theoretical framework of analysis and draw lessons from a donor-funded project focused on both disability and gender inclusion in rural tourism value chain. The source material is drawn from real case studies involving PWDs who received training through the Skills for Inclusive Growth (S4IG) project, which started in December 2016. During phase I of S4IG (2016-2020), the project provided support for skills development of tourism industry in four districts (Ampara, Batticaloa, Polonnaruwa and Trincomalee) and during Phase II (2021-2024), it was expanded to include two more districts (Anuradhapura and Matale). This project was funded and technically supported by the Australian Government and implemented in collaboration with Sri Lanka's Ministry of Skills Development and Vocational Training (MSDVT). It provided technical support and introduced innovative training methodologies to increase PWD participation in skills development programmes targeted at occupations in tourism industry.

The remainder of this article comprises six sections. The next section provides background information on disability prevalence in Sri Lanka and status of training for PWDs in target beneficiary districts of the project. The third section presents a brief review on theoretical foundations of DI in tourism industry. Section four spells out methodology and Section five elaborates DI experience in tourism value chain drawing on secondary data and case study evidence of PWD trainees. The last section concludes.

2.0 BACKGROUND

Disability prevalence rate in Sri Lanka was 15.7 percent in 2024 as against global average of 16 percent in 2023 (DCS, 2026 and WHO, 2023). Of this total, the highest prevalence of impairment was related to vision (9.5%), followed by mobility (8.3%), cognition (3.8%), and hearing (3.6%). About 3.8 percent of PWDs are with GCE (O/L) or above qualifications but large majority are economically inactive (86.9%) and by gender it is much higher among females (92.6%) relative to male PWDs (79.2%). The unemployment rate among persons with disabilities is 3.5 percent and 9.6 percent among male and females respectively (DCS, 2026). Official data from the apex Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission (TVEC) does not maintain any information on enrolment of persons with disabilities. At tertiary level, majority of training providers are not equipped with the necessary training methodologies and skills development programmes that would facilitate skills development of PWDs. This results in the deprivation of employment opportunities for PWDs.

In 2024, PWDs accounted for 14 percent of the total population (286,275) in target beneficiary districts and the system of education and training system has failed to provide training opportunities for them to acquire employable skills. At national level, the Department of Education has special education units in selected schools but lacking competent teachers in special education at district level. In the four districts there were 21 training institutes offering more than 260 skills development programmes but none of them were equipped with accessible physical and digital infrastructure, inclusive design, adaptive training methods, and modified competency-based assessments. The trainers were also not familiar with training methodologies to train disabled persons. In addition to training institutes, Social Service Officers attached to Department of Social Services are tasked with implementing community-based rehabilitation programmes for vulnerable groups including PWDs. These are more welfare-oriented programmes rather than promoting employable skills of PWDs. Target beneficiary districts belong to lagging regions in Sri Lanka which are characterized by lower levels of regional output, weaker infrastructure, limited access to quality education and training, healthcare, higher poverty rates, and limited employment opportunities compared to more developed districts. Household incomes were 30 percent lower than the national average, and employment was heavily concentrated in the informal sector (DCS, 2017 and 2018).

Employment of PWDs in tourism sector micro, small and medium scale enterprises (MSMEs) in project beneficiary districts was less than one percent with heavy dominance of male PWDs (80%). In terms of occupation categories, majority of them belong to low skilled occupations (53%) while the rest was distributed among professional (20%), supervisory (7%) and medium skilled (20%) occupations (S4IG, 2017). Moreover, only 25 percent of MSMEs in tourism value chain were willing to employ PWDs and the most significant barrier they face for absorbing PWDs is lack of experience (42%), followed by absence of capacity to train PWDs (34%), the lack of policies or business practices (40%) and the lack of jobs that can be performed by PWDs. This evidence suggests that employers may be receptive to employing PWDs if their 'disability confidence' is strengthened through supportive interventions such as skills development. It may also lead to high achievements in human development and inclusive growth due to improved PWD participation in tourism value chain.

3.0 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

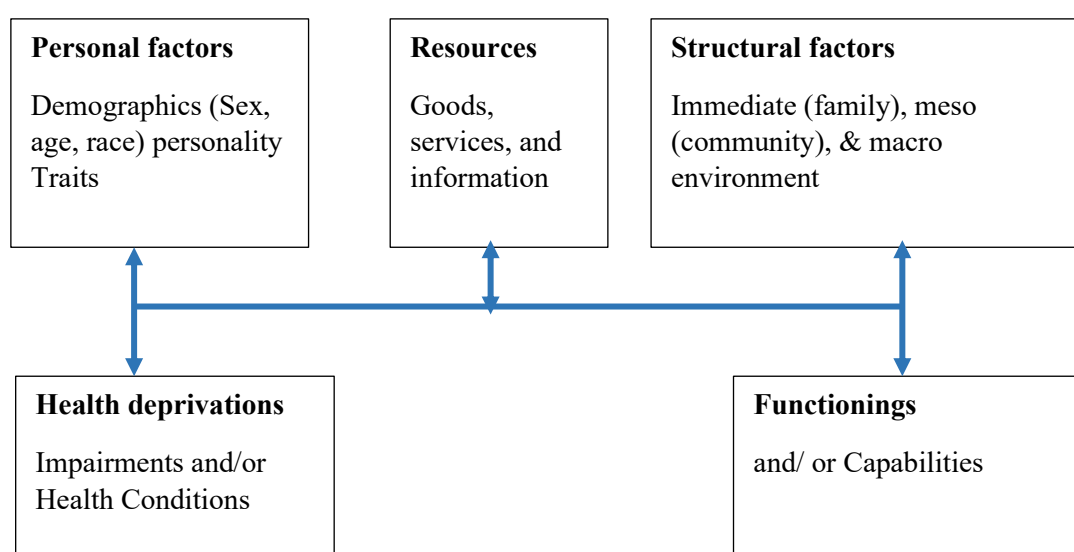
Existing body of work on DI in tourism industry is scant, fragmented and has taken a narrow focus concentrating on social entrepreneurship, social benefits, employer attitudes, and legal provisions. The most recent and comprehensive literature review on disability employment in hospitality industry by Manoharan et al., (2023) focused on three distinct conceptual models (e.g. employer initiatives, barriers & facilitators, and benefits & challenges) but failed to cover skills development of PWDs. Jamin et al., (2024) also conducted a literature review on tourism sector DI from the perspectives of customers and employees with disabilities but no coverage on training of PWDs.

The theoretical framework of the present study is guided by the initial work of Nussbaum (2006) and Sen (2009) who started using the capability approach to examine human development issues of PWDs. Martha Nussbaum's (2006) capability approach shifts the focus from merely providing charity to ensuring fundamental human rights of PWDs. As argued by Nussbaum (2006) traditional theories (e.g., Social Contract Theory) assume a society made of

"free, equal, and independent" citizens. They exclude people with severe physical or mental disabilities from the initial design of society's rules and measure a person's worth by their economic output. In contrast, the capabilities approach argues that every human being has innate dignity, regardless of economic productivity.

Sen's capability approach, detailed in *The Idea of Justice* (2009), defines justice by a person's actual freedom to achieve valuable "functionings". Instead of focusing merely on resources or utility, Sen argues that justice requires removing structural, social, and personal barriers so individuals can choose the lives they value. Sen's capability approach provides a localized diagnostic tool to assess how environmental, social, cultural, and economic barriers restrict the capability set. It views disability not just as an individual medical deficit, but as a relational phenomenon—the interaction between an individual's physical and mental characteristics and their surrounding environment. In other words, Sen's (2009) capability approach to justice motivates comparative assessments of wellbeing that may lead to insights on the extent and nature of deprivations experienced by PWDs that have implications for policies and justice enhancing interventions. In line with these arguments, Mitra (2018, p.12) developed the human development model of disability (HDMD) focusing on interlinks between an individual's capabilities, functionings, agency, structural, and personal factors (Figure 1). The HDMD makes the selection of relevant determinants of capabilities/ functionings explicit and guides empirical work on disability inclusion thorough skills development. Other theoretical models such as the Social, Medical, and International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), the Nagi, and the WHO fall short of recognizing the importance and the challenge of selecting relevant dimensions of PWD training. Accordingly, the human development approach tries to analyze how impairment may affect an individual's social and economic wellbeing. We use the human development model of disability for the present analysis because we think it can generate useful insights for the analysis of DI through skills development in the context of resource poor developing economies.

Figure 1: The Human Development Model of Disability



Source: Mitra (2018).

Following the initial work by Baum et al. (2016), we also use a three-tiered macro, meso, and micro-level framework to identify multi-layered factors shaping disability inclusion in tourism through skills development. As argued in the literature existing body of work in this domain is heavily concentrated on organizational and managerial level issues and fails to capture the influence of wider social, political, and economic factors at meso and micro level (Baum et al. (2016), Lu et al. 2024). Following the initial work by Baum et al. (2016) we also use a three-tiered macro, meso and micro level framework to identify multi-layered factors around disability inclusion in tourism through skills development. Since the focus of this paper is on rural tourism value chain in less developed districts of Sri Lanka, we concentrate more on interlinks between meso and micro level factors in promoting DI in tourism through skills development.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

Our research is based on case study methodology which includes both qualitative and participatory methods to generate in-depth empirical data. We start the analysis with secondary data and highlight salient points of DI in rural tourism value chain. It also provides information on employers' willingness to employ disabled workers and major constraints faced by them in absorbing PWDs. We then present eight case studies representing five different sub-sectors in the tourism value chain e.g., hotel, restaurant, travel, tour guide, and bakery industry. The participants were selected purposively, paying special attention to distinct types of disabilities and different occupations in the tourism value chain. In addition to the main participants, the trainers, employers, family members, and community groups were also interviewed as secondary participants to gather insights into the background information and post-training behaviour of PWD trainees.

The study followed standard ethical guidelines and practices in conducting interviews with both primary and secondary participants. Informed consent was obtained from PWD trainees, ensuring they agreed to participate voluntarily and without duress before the research commenced. All necessary steps were taken to ensure every PWD participant fully understood the research process, along with the importance and necessity of their involvement. Additionally, secondary participants were briefed on the study's purpose, and their participation was also voluntary.

The in-depth interviews and discussions were guided by the theoretical framework of HDMD and ethnographic research methodologies. More specifically, the latter included an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of PWDs, focusing on their social, cultural, demographic, economic, and political contexts. The purpose was to get a better understanding of case specific details through the lens of the PWDs. As argued in the literature, such methodologies encourage PWDs to express their views freely irrespective of social, legal, cultural, or political constraints. The information related to case studies of Phase one and early part of Phase two of S4IG project were systematically updated through follow-up interviews using semi-structured questionnaires, ensuring both comprehensive and consistent data collection. To facilitate effective communication, interviews were conducted in the language preferred by each respondent (e.g. Tamil or Sinhala). All responses were subsequently transcribed into English to maintain consistency and clarity in the analysis. We triangulated these interviews with

information collected from employers, training providers, policy makers, and family members of PWD trainees.

5.0 ANALYSIS

5.1 S4IG intervention in promoting DI in the tourism value chain.

S4IG support for disability inclusion through skills development covered three main areas of support: a) development of training courses and learning materials, b) testing disability inclusion models, and c) facilitation of policy support. The first includes designing new course programs, including trainee workbooks, toolkits, trainer guides, assessment instruments, and online or video-based tri-lingual learning resources (Table 1). Second, testing disability inclusion models, covers the design and testing of four training programs tailored for PWDs aspiring to find employment in the tourism industry: Assistant Cook, Room Attendant, Professional Baker, and Professional Travel Agent. This was facilitated by the YMCA with the enrolment of 211 trainees in these four vocational fields including 36 PWD trainees.

Third, facilitating policy support is vital as there were no clear guidelines for trainers, NVQ assessors, and training institutes to accommodate PWDs. S4IG filled this vacuum through technical assistance for curriculum development, supply of learning materials, training of trainers, and inter-institutional coordination. In response to these developments, the apex body, TVEC issued a circular requiring NVQ assessors to make reasonable adjustments for PWDs in final assessments. Reasonable adjustments include an additional 25 percent of time to complete assessments, the provision of device or writing aid assistance, and conducting assessments in familiar settings using the same equipment and utensils used during training.

Table 1: S4IG support for DI through course programme development

Course	Technical support	Accreditation
Room Attendant course	video based tri-lingual learning materials modules, trainer guides, assessment instruments,	NVQ 2
Multi-Tasker Course	Videos & workbooks, tri-lingual learning materials, trainer guides, assessment instruments,	NVQ 3 & International Standard equivalent
Industry certified Bakery Skills	Course modules for training providers to adopt, assessment instruments, tri-lingual learning materials,	NVQ 3
Area Tour Guide modules for Tuk Tuk drivers & area participants willing to become a tour guide	Tri-lingual course material & videos, trainer guides, assessment instruments,	Recognized as Area /Site Tour Guide by Regional Authorities
e-Tourism online course	Course material and videos, tri-lingual learning materials, Training facilitator guide. E tourism course in USB version,	International Standard equivalent & Industry validated

	Tourism alliance website, Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism and Hotel Management.	
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Source: S4IG records.

S4IG interventions in disability inclusion led to enrollment of 164 PWDs in seven different course programmes, representing 2.5 percent of total trainees (Table 2). Among PWD participants, the completion rate was 80 percent, higher than S4IG's overall rate of 67 percent (S4IG, 2020). Female PWDs made up 31 percent of trainees during Phase I and 39 percent in Phase II. By type of programmes, strong demand from PWDs was visible in areas such as travel, food and beverages, cookery, destination development, accommodation, and language skills (Table 3). The increased enrollment of PWDs in Phase II was due to high demand for two programs developed under the reasonable adjustment model: a) ICT Training for students with autism, and b) Food and Beverages Training for students with Down Syndrome.

Table 2: Salient features of Skills Development Programmes

Criteria	Unit	Phase I(2016-2020)	Phase II (2021-2024)
Total enrolment	Nos	5344	1553
Overall completion rate	%	75.5	65
Female share of enrolment	%	40.3	35.9
Female share of enrolment in tourism sector at national level	%	45.0	45.0
PWD share of enrolment	%	2.7	1.3
Female share of PWDs	%	31	39
Female share of enrolment in S4IG sponsored programmes	%	40.3	36.1
Female share of enrolment in tourism sector at national level	%	45.0	45.0

Source: S4IG database

Table 3: PWD participation by occupation specific programmes - %

Type of programme	Phase I	Type of programme	Phase II
Travel booking	24.6	Reasonable Adjustment for DI	24.4
Food and Beverage	6.0	Professional Cookery	3.9
Language skills	4.7	Destination Development	2.7
Accommodation	2.2	Foundational Hospitality skills (Multitasker)	1.2
Leisure/Excursion/Tours	2.1	Professional Business Coaching	0.8
Related services	1.3	Overall	4.1
Soft Skills	1.1		
Overall	2.7		

Source: S4IG database

5.2 Case Study Evidence

This section of the paper presents case study evidence on PWD training in the rural sector tourism value chain covering six different occupation categories: Baker, Tuk Tuk Driver, Cook, Travel Agent, Room Attendant, and Tour Guide. The PWD trainees covered in the analysis are multiethnic, multi religious and drawn from target beneficiary districts of S4IG and notable positive outcomes of PWD training are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Brief Summary of Case Studies on DI

Name	Gender	Disability	Course followed	Key point/ Positive outcome
Ruwanthika	F	Lost eyesight	Baker	Win-win situation for both employer and PWD
Mohamed Ilhass	M	Hearing and speech	Room Attendant	Employer is fully convinced of potential contributions by PWDs
Nazeek	M	Intellectual disability	Room Attendant	High employer satisfaction with PWD's performance
Lavan Kumar	M	Visually impaired	Travel Agent	Job satisfaction and employer trust
Deshika	F	Heart problems	Cookery	PWD's Perseverance & family support.
Laitha	F	Amputee	Supreme Chef	Perseverance and determination to achieve job aspirations.
Kuththoos	M	Polio	Site tour guide module	Job satisfaction & improved family welfare.
Sanjana	F	Amputee	Baker	PWD's perseverance & peer support

Source: S4IG database

Case study 1: Vision Impaired female PWD working in bakery industry.

Ruwanthika, aged twenty-nine, resides in Polonnaruwa. She began her career as a tailor, specializing in children's school uniforms for three years until she experienced a decline in her vision. Following three eye surgeries, she suffered significant vision loss which resulted in the termination of her employment due to extended medical leave. Subsequently, she attempted to work from home, but impaired eyesight hindered her ability to meet required stitching standards. Ruwanthika started searching for alternative job opportunities and learned about the S4IG-supported Bakery course (NVQ Level 3) in Batticaloa which is far from her hometown. Considering potential job prospects in the bakery industry and her own interest in bakery products, she decided to enroll in the programme.

Upon completing her coursework, Ruwanthika approached the three largest bakeries in town for on-the-job training (OJT) but was unsuccessful. She persisted and eventually met Ms. Anusha, a bakery owner interested in expanding her business with a wood-fired oven. This presented an excellent opportunity for Ruwanthika to demonstrate her expertise in baking such ovens. After sampling cupcakes, desserts, and pizzas prepared by Ruwanthika, Ms. Anusha decided to employ PWD trainee on part-time basis. Flexible work arrangements were provided,

and the bakery expanded its offerings with a new urban menu available on Fridays and weekends. Additionally, the bakery secured a contract with the District Government Office to provide catering services for official functions.

Ruwanthika also established her own home-based bakery business and purchased a Tuk Tuk van for her father, enabling him to start a mobile bakery service. Both businesses experienced significant growth, and Ruwanthika's employer offered the following feedback comments about PWD trainees.

"I only used to make breads and buns in my bakery prior to employing Ruwanthika. Neither myself nor my workers are skilled enough to make anything else. I am impressed with the skills that Ruwanthika possess. When I see her, I do not see her disability, I see her as a multi-skilled worker, who could potentially be my business partner. Her disability was not a barrier to me at all compared to her skills set. Because of her, we now produce items such as, pastries, pizzas, cakes, and cupcakes adding value to what we offer at the bakery thus increasing our business income."

This case study demonstrates high willingness to hire PWD trainees by female owned micro scale business enterprises relative to small, medium, and large-scale establishments in bakery industry. The employer of this case study stated that more awareness on productivity of PWD trainees is needed to promote DI in skills development and employment. She further stated that, once trained and employed in an accessible environment, skills of the trainees are the most crucial factor rather than physical impairment. If training opportunities are provided with the application of innovative training methodologies, PWDs can acquire job specific skills and create win-win situations for both the employer and employee.

CS 2: Mohamed Ilhas - Hearing and speech impaired. No one is left out.

Mohamed Ilhas and three other members of the family are hearing and speech impaired. He is 17 years old and hails from a farming family in Arugambay which is a well-known tourism destination especially among foreign guests. However, Ilhas or his family had no connection with local tourism industry, and the family has so far survived on their father's meagre earnings as a farmer. This is a family faced with multiple challenges originating from poverty, disability, limited access to education and training, lack of social capital, and no opportunities for employment. Having observed the socio-economic benefits associated with tourism industry in Arugambay, Ilhas had lot of interest in tourism as a potential source of employment. When he heard about an international cookery course offered by S4IG, Ilhas was excited but reluctant to enroll in a formal training course on cookery due to his disabilities. To his relief, the course was adapted to be taught through video, allowing him to use visual mode of learning. As a result, he successfully completed the course in three months.

After receiving training in cookery, Ilhas secured a position at the Green Ocean Bay Resort as an assistant cook and housekeeper with a monthly remuneration of LKR 15,000 (US\$ 50). Initially, the owner had reservations about Ilhas's ability to interact effectively with guests. However, during the first month of on-the-job training, Ilhas's strong work ethic and enthusiasm persuaded the owner to give him the opportunity. Ilhas approached his duties with diligence, collaborated seamlessly with his peers, engaged warmly with guests and shared constructive ideas with the owner. Impressed by Ilhas's stellar performance, the owner became

convinced of human resource value of trained PWDs and decided to learn sign language with the intention of employing more PWDs. This is an interesting case study which demonstrates the role of employers in promoting DI in tourism.

CS 3: S.H.M. Nazeek with an intellectual disability- great determination and resilience

Nazeek is a person with an intellectual disability who continued school education up to primary level and joined the labour market as a casual laborer. He heard about S4IG sponsored workplace-based Room Attendant training and earned NVQ Level 2 certification. Despite various social and economic problems, Nazeek showed great determination and resilience during the period of training and started working as a Room Attendant at Nilaveli Beach Resort.

Nazeek's previous employer, the Beach Resort Manager, stated that Nazeek is well-disciplined and focused on his job role. He underwent COVID-19 prevention training and successfully performed his duties with safety jackets and attire and checking the visitors. The hotel received approval to operate during the pandemic, and the manager proudly stated that Nazeek was part of this success. The manager further stated that Nazeek is well-integrated with his peers and attendance is regular and punctual. He is well trained and capable of performing well in any hotel. However, due to the low demand during the off-season, Nazeek decided to leave Nilaveli Beach Hotel and joined a company specializing in the export of spices, including cardamom, cinnamon, and cloves. Currently, he earns around LKR 40,000 per month (US\$ 133) as against his earlier earnings of LKR 14,000 per month, plus service charges and tips from visitors (US\$ 53).

Nazeek's mother-in-law mentioned that his present employer is pleased with his work, as he is diligent and performs his tasks perfectly. She prefers him to work in a hotel in Trincomalee, as she is currently taking care of his wife who is also a PWD with an intellectual disability and children. She also stated that S4IG training has helped him to improve working skills and find employment in the formal sector.

Nazeek is happy and satisfied with his current job, and his employer is happy with his performance. His colleagues appreciate his work ethics and dedication. When asked about career development goals he could not provide a clear answer but expressed his desire to join the hotel sector and work as a room attendant in Trincomalee. Overall, Nazeek is content with his current job and the recognition he has earned for his hard work and dedication.

CS 4: Kaneshamoorthy Lavakumar (Visually Impaired)- Power of skills development

Lavakumar was an unemployed graduate living in Batticaloa. He followed a Diploma in Professional Travel Agent course with OJT at a Travel agent shop. After completing his training, he got a chance to apply for a position in district administration and succeeded at the interview due to extra marks he earned at the interview on the strength of his Diploma in Professional Travel Agent. When asked about training he received Lavakumar said the following:

"The S4IG-supported Travel Agent program was highly beneficial, equipping me with essential skills such as effective communication, client management, telephone operation, and office management. These skills helped me secure five additional marks at an interview for a

degree-holder appointment in the public sector. Moreover, the training is closely aligned with my current role, where I assist and support the public seeking services in the Public Administration sector as a telephone operator. I provide clear information to the public who seek assistance from the Divisional Secretariat. Additionally, the Administration Officer, who is my supervisor, trusts my work and assigns me to answer his phone calls in his absence, as he believes I perform well. This is a result of the training and on-the-job experience I gained through skills training provided by YMCA and the course conducted by IDM campus with the support of S4IG."

Lavakumar is happy with his present job as the training has helped him to improve his work performance as a public servant. With respect to career plans Lavakumar feels that he needs more training in language skills, especially in English and Sinhala. He mentioned that improving his Sinhala communication skills would enhance his ability to manage calls more effectively when he receives calls in Sinhala. Lavakumar's supervisor appreciates his dedication, genuine effort, and professional approach to his work.

CS 5: Deshika Tharani Kariyawasam- Power of perseverance and family support

Deshika Tharani Kariyawasam is a person with special needs affected by congenital heart disease (CHD). Recognizing this early on, her family took initial steps to help her thrive along with other children. They enrolled her in activity schools and regularly took her to the park, all with the aim of developing her social skills and confidence. Her mother made a significant sacrifice by resigning from her private sector job in a Finance Company, dedicating herself entirely to support her daughters' education. She also completed a diploma in special education and joined a school for children with special needs as a volunteer teacher.

Deshika could not successfully complete her Ordinary Level (O/L) examination due to health reasons, and her parents encouraged her to explore other skills, such as cooking and sewing. Training opportunities for both fields were not available for Deshika to acquire employable skills. Meanwhile, her parents came to know about the S4IG sponsored Reasonable Adjustment Program Model (RIPM), specifically designed to support slow learners and individuals with autism. They grabbed this opportunity and decided to enroll Deshika in RIPM programme. It took a significant and positive turn around in Deshika's life. After completing the programme Deshika was lucky to get a placement at Pizza Hut. Prior to this, she sewed basic patterns and made pillowcases, which she sold to local shops. Although the income was modest, it gave her self-confidence and some financial independence.

At Pizza Hut, Deshika manages basic documents and it is a clear indication of a significant improvement in her overall mental stability. This development is a testament to the program's effectiveness in preparing PWDs for real-world challenges. Deshika has more financial independence after joining Piza Hut and is well-integrated with her friends and others in her family network. Deshika's mother, who has been the driving force behind her, is pleased with learning and social outcomes of her child. She stated the following with respect to the net outcome of RIMP:

"It's not just employment, it's happiness, fulfillment, and a step towards the independence she's always wanted." She went on and said, "the change in her has been extraordinary, beyond anything I ever imagined."

“To be honest, the efforts I made to help Deshika socialize and adjust to everyday life in society pale in comparison to the transformative impact of the S4IG program. The change in her has been nothing short of extraordinary, beyond anything I have ever imagined.”

Deshika's journey through RIMP demonstrates the power of innovative methods of skills development of PWDs, which goes beyond skills training and provides participants with the tools they need to navigate the world of work independently. With the support of her family and the opportunities presented by the program, Deshika has found not only employment but also a renewed sense of self-confidence and hope for the future. Deshika's story is one of courage, dedication, support, and the unwavering love of a family determined to help their child find her way in the real world. Training intervention has resulted in complete happiness for the entire family.

CS 6: Lalitha Srikanthan- an amputee-No disability too great

Lalitha is a girl in a family of six who had countless challenges during her childhood. The thirty-year secessionist conflict took its toll on the family and Lalitha had one leg amputated just above the knee during the war. They also experienced enormous economic problems, and her mother decided to migrate to the Middle East as a housekeeper to ensure survival of her family. Despite all these problems, Lalitha managed to continue her school education up to Grade 10.

At the age of twenty-four, she obtained employment in a local organization. While working there Lalitha met her life partner, Sri Kanthan, who had helped her at the workplace and overlooked the fact that she was an amputee. Despite strong opposition from parents, they got married and Lalitha became a fulltime housewife. When a social worker had informed her about the Supreme Chef competition auditions organized by the S4IG at the East Lagoon Hotel in Batticaloa, she felt encouraged, as the competition was open to the PWDs. The Supreme Chef competition was an S4IG initiative aimed at creating income earning opportunities for women and PWDs in rural tourism value chain.

During the audition, Lalitha displayed her cooking abilities by preparing cuttlefish curry and was thrilled to be selected for additional training in Colombo. This presented a difficult choice, as she had to leave her children and husband behind in Batticaloa to travel to Colombo for her training. Her husband, Sri Kanthan, agreed to look after the children during her absence and encouraged Lalitha to go to Colombo and follow the programme. Accepting the challenge, Lalitha completed her training in Colombo, collected NVQ 4 certification in Commercial Cookery, and advanced her skills to realize her dream of becoming a chef. On the strength of this qualification, Lalitha managed to get a job as a chef at Shakti Vani Ayu Resort in Kalkudah, Batticaloa. Lalitha's story highlights perseverance and determination in pursuing career aspirations, despite major structural barriers, health deprivations, and resource constraints, making her an inspiring role model for others facing adversity.

CS 7: Kuththoos - Polio affected male working as a Tuk Tuk driver: Doing what you love and enjoying high economic and social returns.

Kuththoos is a male PWD who had been affected by polio since birth. He lives in Arugambe and studied up to primary level with his mother's support, who physically carried him to school

every day and dropped out at the age of thirteen. Later, he started working as a casual worker in the informal sector. After marrying and having children, he began searching for stable employment opportunities to support his family. Through a friend, he picked up driving skills to drive a Tuk Tuk despite his physical disability. However, despite repeated efforts, Kuththoos could not get his official Tuk Tuk driving license due to his physical disability.

Motivated by his keen interest in working as a driver, Kuththoos bought a second-hand Tuk Tuk and started working informally as an unlicensed Tuk Tuk driver. At this time S4IG was planning to implement a project in Arugambay named 'Tuk Tuk Drivers Pathway to Tour Guiding.' S4IG met Kuddoos and explained the project and the possibilities to become a tour guide in Arugambay and gain his driving license for the Tuk Tuk. He enrolled in Site Tour guiding programme organized by S4IG but was not in full attendance during the initial stage of the training, due to low level of self-confidence. Over time, however, he developed a keen interest in tour guiding and actively participated in training activities and started to realize the potential benefits. At the end, he completed the training programme and acquired knowledge and skills in basic ethics of tour guiding, communication skills, storytelling, and cultural insights. He also resolved the fundamental barrier of obtaining a medical certificate for driving license by modifying his Tuk Tuk. By making reasonable adjustments to his vehicle and showing he was medically fit to drive a Tuk Tuk he obtained his license.

Kuththoos is now a formal Tuk Tuk driver with license as site tour guide recognized by Eastern Tourism Bureau. Kuththoos enjoys his work, feels more fulfilled, and can provide better income support for his family. The support from S4IG helped him overcome his doubts about tour guiding and build a network in the local area, leading to a significant improvement in his confidence and skills. He has also gained significant recognition among the tuk-tuk association and the business community in Arugambay. This recognition made him feel happy and respected by others in his business community. They also support him by linking visitors to take to the sites. This has not only enhanced his social standing but also provided him with a sense of accomplishment and pride in his work. Kuththoos is now able to confidently drive his adjusted tuk-tuk and take visitors to various sites, and his daily earnings in December 2024 were around LKR 3000 (US \$10) per day as against daily earnings of around LKR 700 (US\$ 2.3) during pre-training period. The Tourist Tuk Tuk Association Secretary stated that Kuththoos has gained exceptionally good confidence in his career as a tourist travel facilitator after his training and obtaining driving license with reasonable adjustments to his Tuk-Tuk. This recognition has made him feel happy and respected by his peers and local business society.

CS 8 - Sanjana: An inspiration to all

Sanjana, a 21-year-old female from Hinkurangoda in the Polonnaruwa District, has faced many challenges throughout her life. She lost her right hand due to medical negligence. She grew up with various relatives, having been orphaned at an early age. Despite these difficulties she continued her school education up to GCE O/L. She had lot of interest in bakery products and decided to join the labour market, preferably as a baker of cakes. When she heard about the S4IG sponsored bakery training she was excited and hopeful of becoming a professional cake baker. She immediately decided to enroll in the programme irrespective of her disability and long distance to the training center.

The training provided her with comprehensive knowledge of various techniques for preparing baked goods, including cakes, buns, and pastries. On completion of her six months training, she joined Jayantha Bake House in Polonnaruwa. With just a left-hand to work in the kitchen, it is not an easy job. There were times when she is challenged from carrying heavy trays to the oven or balancing the ingredients. But Sanjana has an excellent group of colleagues who helped her get through the work.

Sanjana is characterized by courage and determination. Her ambition is to set up her own bakery business, focusing on delivering high-quality cakes and baked goods to both residents and guests. Through her dedication, Sanjana has effectively challenged the misconception that disability constitutes a barrier to join the workforce, exemplifying that individuals can realize their full potential regardless of circumstances. S4IG training has facilitated opportunities and created an environment conducive to pursuing her professional aspirations. Sanjana's experience represents more than a mere career transition; it is a testament to individual capabilities, the discovery of genuine passion, and progress toward defined career objectives.

5.3 Overall assessment

Disability inclusion through skills development is an effective strategy to create a more inclusive and equitable society. In developing economies, PWDs encounter a range of obstacles when seeking employment, such as lack of self-confidence, restricted educational and training opportunities, inaccessible work environments, poverty, and insufficient social connections. Each person with a disability is differently abled and their training needs proportionately vary and hence policy makers, training providers, and employers need to consider different abilities of PWDs and create a conducive learning environment with the application of reasonable adjustment training methodologies.

A cross-sectional view of the above case studies reveals deprivations experienced by PWDs are a result of multiple factors. Most of them grew up facing countless challenges associated with poverty, disability, and regional underdevelopment. For example, Kuththoos' impairment may have been shaped by several factors such as growing up in severe poverty, contracting polio, no community support, and no opportunities for skills development or employment. These barriers restricted his capabilities and functioning. His story also demonstrates how environmental support at the community level can boost human development of PWDs after training.

The influence of PWD's personal characteristics such as self-determination and perseverance seems to be key determinants of the success behind Deshika, Lalitha and Sanjana. In the case of Deshika, the extra ordinary commitment and perseverance deployed by her mother to ensure better learning and social outcomes and happiness of the entire family illustrates the vital role assigned to immediate family members in promoting DI through skills development. The enhanced performance of PWD trainees has resulted in positive changes in the perceptions of employers' attitudes towards recruiting PWD trainees. For instance, Ilhas's manager decided to learn sign language with the objective of hiring more PWDs. Case evidence of Nazeek, Lavan Kumar, Ilhas and Ruwanthi reveals power of employer satisfaction in promoting DI through skills development.

In contrast to Oslen's (2024) findings, our case study evidence reveals that PWD trainees were willingness to disclose details of their impairments and socio-economic background at the beginning of training and employment. This voluntary disclosure enabled training providers, employers, and policy makers to design and implement more effective skills development interventions. It has also benefited PWD trainees as skills development can have a profound impact on their confidence and self-esteem. As they acquire new skills and competencies, PWDs gain a sense of accomplishment, empowerment, real freedom to achieve the functionings they value, and community recognition. This can lead to increased motivation and a greater willingness to pursue further education and career progress. Case study evidence also suggests that labour-intensive rural tourism value chains in less developed regions of developing economies may offer greater opportunities to absorb PWD trainees than goods-producing sectors. In Sri Lanka, tourism has been a major contributor to the post-crisis economic recovery, and the sector is poised to generate a range of investment and employment opportunities.

Another important finding of the study is the vital role played by reasonable adjustment training methodologies in enhancing access to training, building trainees' confidence and developing employable skills of PWD trainees. Adjustments to the learning environment, training delivery and assessment methods enabled Ruwanthi, Kuththos, Nazeek, Lavankumara, Lalitha, and Ilhas to access and participate in training on an equal basis with trainees without disabilities. As evident from the case studies, reasonable adjustment became an important source of support, helping PWD trainees pursue their employment aspirations.

The case study methodology appeared to be relevant in examining two research questions under investigation. It was very useful in identifying the enablers and barriers affecting the skills development of PWDs in the context of less developed districts in Sri Lanka. The multiple interviews and discussions with the primary and secondary participants led to a very close rapport-building, which improved the quality and depth of information collected. This methodology helped the researcher to capture the nuanced experiences of PWD trainees, evaluate program effectiveness, and unpack the complexity of systemic, environmental, and attitudinal barriers within a localized context. It also enabled the researchers to maintain a closer relationship with the PWD trainees, their family members, and employers (Harwathi, 2019).

The key message emerging from this case study evidence is four-fold: a) The human development model of disability is a useful guide to understand constraining effects of environmental, social, and economic factors over the abilities and opportunities of PWDs; b) Skills development of PWDs is an effective strategy to advance disability inclusion in labor-intensive industries; c) Implementing reasonable adjustment models facilitates skill-building for PWDs; and d) Donor involvement in disability inclusion through skill development significantly enhances human development, especially in the context of less developed economies.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The present study has two major limitations. First, the case studies selected are not a representative sample of all PWD trainees of S4IG disability inclusion interventions. Second, the review of employer perspectives does not fully cover all the employers who participated in

S4IG-sponsored PWD training programmes. Despite these limitations, the findings reveal exposure to PWDs in rural tourism value chain and are indicative of the broader population, marking a notable distinction from prior studies. The human development model of disability acknowledges interdependence among multiple factors, including personal, structural, capabilities, health-related aspects, and resources in realizing the full benefits of disability inclusion through skills development. In addition, the findings confirm the crucial role played by the donor community in promoting human development outcomes through skills development of PWDs. These findings offer valuable guidance for policymakers and other stakeholders interested in promoting disability inclusion through skills development.

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