

# In Conversation: Aldred H. Neufeldt

1999-03-18

## In Conversation: Aldred H. Neufeldt

People with disabilities have long been faced with barriers when it comes to employment or generating their own income. Be it the result of blatant discrimination, or a narrow focus by policy-makers or professionals, historically we have been led to believe there are only two options for people with disabilities: reliance on familial assistance plus social safety nets, or wage employment. However, there is another possibility: self-directed employment -- people with disabilities owning their own businesses. In *Disability and Self-directed Employment: Business Development Models* authors Aldred Neufeldt and Alison Albright present the first comprehensive exploration of this alternative. In this interview with *Reports*, Mr. Neufeldt shares some of his thoughts and concerns regarding the future for disabled people and their efforts to provide meaningful work for themselves.

---

### **Are conditions for disabled persons improving or not, and why is that?**

I would like to believe that they are. The UN Decade of Disabled Persons ("Self-directed Employment and Disabled People" is one of the concluding initiatives of the UN Decade of Disabled Persons) did a lot to create public awareness. There also are a notable number of new initiatives, here in Canada and internationally, which seek to include disabled people.

But it is a little too early to tell. It should be noted that public stigma and shame attached to disability is thousands of years old. These attitudes are deeply engrained in all societies. Though there have been some tangible gains in quite a few countries over the last two or three decades, we have seen how in previous history how such gains in public acceptance and support of disabled people can be reversed within a short period of time. I don't think we can be confident that recent gains will be sustained into the long term until at least two generations have passed (ie. at least 40 years).

It should also be noted that in many countries there have not, as yet, been many gains. Amongst the newly industrialized countries, for example, there are few instances where disabled people are supported in ways that enable them to participate as equals in their societies. And, of course, amongst the low income countries the challenge is even greater. Having said this, there are also some that are beacons of light. The government of the Philippines, for example, passed legislation entrenching the rights of disabled people. So did the government of Zimbabwe. These are beacons of light. It is not surprising that it is in these countries that we see the greatest progress being made towards disabled people being enabled to pursue self-directed employment.

### **Is it the job of government, business, the general public or all three to safeguard and support disabled persons in directing their own employment?**

This question sounds simple, but the answer warrants some consideration. There is a strong case to be made that all three - the general public, the business community, and governments - should be involved in insuring that disabled people are enabled to pursue their own employment future the same way that others are. For a portion of those it should be the opportunity to run their own

businesses - what I have called "Self-Directed Employment". The reasons behind this are social, economic, and psychological.

The social reasons have to do with a substantial amount of evidence that a very large portion of disabled people experience discriminatory practices of various kinds. At a minimum, this is reflected by the lack of attention paid to social and physical barriers which currently keep disabled people out of the labour force - and, so, represent an "unequal burden" as compared to non-disabled people. At its most overt, the discrimination is "direct", where it is assumed that because the disabled person is disabled, she or he can't do the kind of work being sought. At other times the discrimination is "indirect", where extra demands are made of disabled people that aren't made of others. Challenging such barriers is a responsibility of governments, businesses, public leaders, and the public at large.

The economic reasons have to do with the fact that in high-income countries routinely 50% of all disabled people are not even in the mainstream labour force, let alone working (its closer to 100% in low income countries). This contrasts with only about 20-25% of non-disabled working age adults in high income countries. Since roughly 10% of all people are disabled, reducing the gap between the labour force participation rates of disabled and non-disabled people implies a net economic gain - not only for the person with the disability but also for society. The gross domestic product goes up, the draw on public support funding is reduced.

Then there is a psychological reason - greater participation by disabled people in employment is a contributor to positive self-esteem. With enhanced self-esteem other contributions to local communities can be expected. There are many possible positive spin-offs.

So, who should take the initiative? Governments are in a position to create positive social and economic environments through the policies that are pursued - taking such initiatives is an essential first step. In the long run, business leaders also tell me that it is good business for them to be supportive of people with disabilities who are seeking to set up their own businesses.

### **What concerns have Self-Directed Employment initiatives raised in the disabled community and are they legitimate?**

Early on there was some concern that self-directed employment initiatives might promote the development of sweatshops for disabled people; or promote situations where individual disabled people would be isolated in their homes and could easily be taken advantage of. I haven't heard those kinds of concerns expressed recently.

However, there is some legitimacy to the concerns. Self-directed employment is not a panacea for all disabled people. One shouldn't expect any substantially larger portion of disabled people to be self-employed than non-disabled people. Further, given the social attitudes and the vulnerability of many disabled persons, one should be concerned about isolation and potential exploitation. It might be noted, though, that these are issues for non-disabled people as well.

### **In what way, other than proprietorship, can disabled persons have more control over their employment? Have you seen or heard of examples?**

We found two main alternative options which are, in some ways, superior. There are many excellent examples of manufacturing and service coops. For instance, DEEDS Industries, in Jamaica, is a business subsidiary owned by a combined disability coop. Though the business subsidiary model has some potential problems associated with it, namely an overeagerness, by

some coops, to realize a profit in their fledgling businesses, some good examples of such subsidiaries have been created.

**In a world of shrinking government budgets and increasing privatization what can disabled persons do for themselves? What policies and regulations will best support them?**

Fundamentally, disabled people want a "level playing field" - which means getting rid of the barriers that confront them. Unfortunately, some disabled people have been socialized into thinking that they can't participate in the economy of their country, even when efforts are made to level the playing field. This has come about as a result of misguided efforts of social service agencies, religious organizations, families, governments, and others to provide "care" in ways that have served to disempower the disabled person. Too often the very laudable motive of "caring" for people who have physical, sensory, or motor impairments and who face seemingly insurmountable barriers, has been confused with taking over the opportunity and power for disabled people to make their own decisions in the name of providing care. There is some remedial work that needs to be undertaken, but, a concerted effort at moving forward the possibility of self-determination for disabled persons can help overcome these historical issues.

In some ways, shrinking government budgets are leading to some salutary results. In particular, as cut-backs are made, there is a rethinking about what are the essentials that governments need to be involved in. For example, in a sizeable number of high-income countries the question is being asked whether the social safety net we have created has some unintended adverse consequences for the recipients. This is potentially good, so long as the thought process is a critical one which ensures that the good aspects of such social safety nets are not thrown out with the bad. A specific example involves the income support received by disabled people. In virtually all high-income countries the income support system is set up in such away that there are real disincentives to enter or re-enter the workplace. Some way has to be found to eliminate the disincentives, while retaining the positive features of income support systems.

As to specific policies, the following kinds of initiatives are the principle ones I would encourage:

- A policy of Equitable Opportunities (ie. ensuring that disabled people have the same civil rights as others).
- Economic policies which encourage the development of small businesses for people.
- Supports which assist disabled people in overcoming barriers which they encounter: "know-how" - work skills, business skills; resources - loans available for people with little equity; mentoring.

**Is this book the first of its kind and who is it aimed at?**

Yes, this book is the first of its kind. It is the first to examine the question - "What does it take to enable disabled people to set up their own income generating capability?" It is aimed at a fairly broad audience. I think it will be of particular interest to three groups of readers. One is the leaders of organizations of and/or for disabled persons with disabilities. In many countries there is increasing interest in self-directed employment. For leaders of these organizations, the book will provide ideas and examples of the kinds of initiatives that can be undertaken, and the pitfalls to be avoided.

Then there are people interested in policy issues within governments, non governmental organizations, and so on. I think our research led to the development of a defensible model of the kinds of initiatives that need to be in place, if disabled people (and others who have been marginalized) are to be enabled to participate in the economic wellbeing of their society.

Finally there are the students and researchers interested in these issues. The book provides a descriptive benchmark against which a large number of other related questions can be asked, tested, and so on. Perhaps our findings need to be modified. That's fine! That is what research is about. Our conclusions seem robust enough to me, but I'm keen to see further work done in this field.

---

### **About the authors**

**Aldred H. Neufeldt**, PhD., former Director of the Allan Roecher Institute, Toronto, Ontario, is currently Professor and Coordinator of International Projects, Community Rehabilitation Studies, at The University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada. He has led a number of international projects concerned with training and employment for adults with disabilities, and Chairs the Global Applied Disability Research Network on Employment and Training (GLADNET).

**Alison L. Albright**, MSc., Disability and Development Resources, Calgary, Canada, is a consultant in disability and community development issues. For the past fifteen years she has been dedicated to promoting healthy, inclusive communities both locally and internationally. Her efforts focus on enabling traditionally disadvantaged groups (people with disabilities, women, ethnospecific minorities) to participate fully in their societies. To reach this goal, participatory approaches are directed towards strengthening existing community resources. She is committed to the idea that social change can be achieved through the development of collaborative partnerships, sharing knowledge and resources.

---

### **The Book**

- [Disability and Self-directed Employment: Business Development Models](#), edited by Aldred H. Neufeldt and Alison L. Albright, IDRC 1998