



COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING

**Persons with  
Disabilities in  
Trinidad & Tobago**  
A Situational Analysis

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If you have any queries about this report, please contact:

Dr. Alison Mead Richardson  
Education Specialist: Technical and Vocational Skills Development

Commonwealth of Learning  
4710 Kingsway, Suite 2500 Burnaby, BC V5H 4M2, CANADA Tel: +1.604.775.8200  
[ameadrichardson@col.org](mailto:ameadrichardson@col.org)



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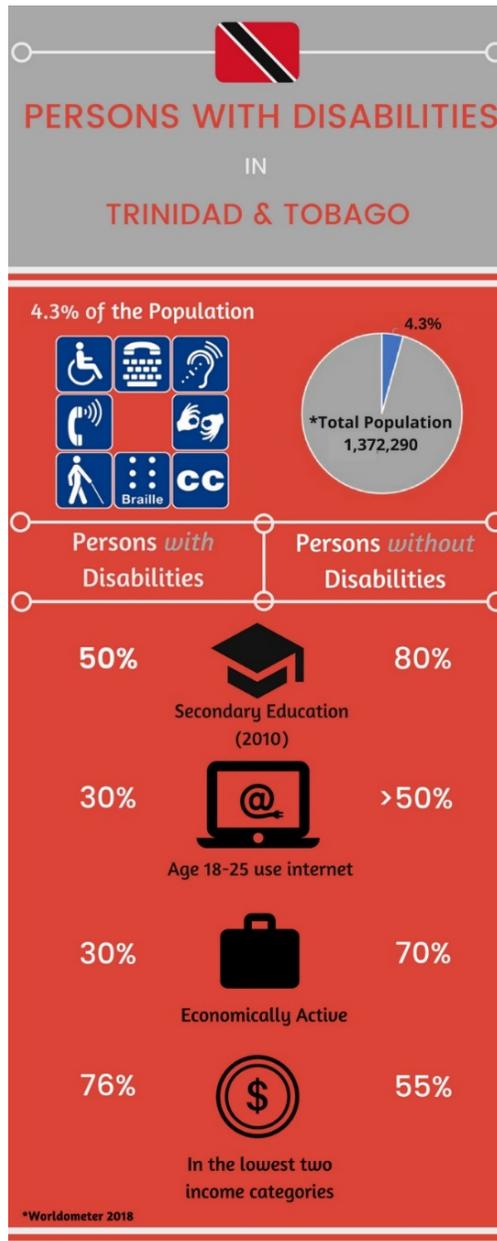
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# Persons with Disabilities in Trinidad & Tobago

## A Situational Analysis

Heather Persons



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# Persons with Disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago

## A Situational Analysis



### Introduction

This situational analysis was carried out to inform the work of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in relation to persons with disabilities and their role in society in Trinidad & Tobago. COL is currently working with the National Center for Persons with Disabilities and YTEPP Limited to develop blended learning programmes in order to extend skills training and improve opportunities for employment or self-employment for PWDs. Focusing on learning for sustainable development, COL is supporting partners to provide more inclusive and socially equitable training opportunities.

The government of Trinidad and Tobago has demonstrated a commitment to improving the lives of persons with disabilities. The government has signed international conventions and passed legislation defining the rights of persons with disabilities, although enabling legislation and regulations remain to be passed in many cases. Government also funds a number of programmes for persons with disabilities that are aimed at improving their integration into society, although economic conditions in recent years have made this more difficult.

Aspects of society that work against the full integration of persons with disability include:

- Lack of accessibility to and around buildings and roadways
- Public attitudes in which the focus is on differences and limitations rather than what each individual is capable of doing
- Lack of access to computers and the Internet and thereby to financial, educational and other services
- Segregation of many primary and secondary students with disabilities into special schools that may not provide the desired level of education required for work or post-secondary education
- Challenges in providing health care
- Lack of access to employment, which flows from negative attitudes on the part of employers, entering the workforce with substandard education, and the inaccessibility of many workplaces.

The initiatives of the government of Trinidad and Tobago are part of a wider Caribbean effort through CARICOM to provide persons with disabilities with the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Bringing persons with disabilities into the mainstream of Caribbean life has been identified as a major focus of the organization, which has supported related initiatives in the area of telephone communications, improved data collection for better decision making, and vocational education (CARICOM Today, 2018).

There are a number of elements related to government, society, and the economy in Trinidad and Tobago that suggest that there will be a brighter future for persons with disabilities in this country and some that indicate that this group will continue to face challenges.

## The Economy

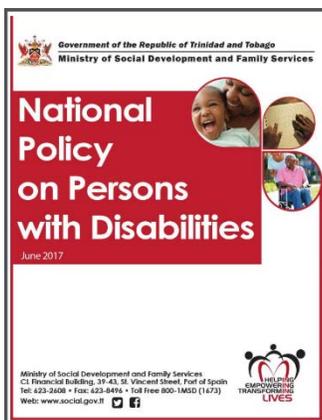
While Trinidad and Tobago has been one of the wealthiest countries in the Caribbean, it is now facing some economic difficulties. The economy was estimated to contract by 2.3 percent in 2017, with a 6.0 percent contraction in 2016 (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2017). This is a result of falling oil prices, which have hurt the country's economic situation in general and had a detrimental effect on other industrial sectors. The oil industry is estimated to comprise 33.7 percent of the national GDP (estimated at US\$26B). Although the country is currently in recession, some mitigation related to oil prices and exports is expected in 2018, and Trinidad and Tobago hosts one of the largest natural gas liquefaction facilities in the western hemisphere. This decline in economic activity has affected government revenues and by extension services provided by government to the general population and also persons with disabilities.

## Legislative Initiatives

The government in Trinidad and Tobago has shown an interest in improving the lives of persons with disabilities in their country. Parliaments have been signatories to a number of international conventions and have enacted legislation and policy initiatives.

Among the government initiatives taken to improve the ability of persons with disabilities to participate in society are the following:

- The Equal Opportunity Act was passed in 2000 to prohibit discrimination, promote equality and establish an Equal Opportunity Commission. It addresses multiple types of discrimination (sex, race and disability, among others) (Jones & Serieux-Lubin, 2018; The Equal Opportunity Commission of Trinidad and Tobago, 2018). Commissioners were first appointed in 2008.
- Trinidad and Tobago signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2007 and ratified it in 2015 (Jones & Serieux-Lubin, 2018).
- Following this ratification, a draft policy document entitled Nation Policy on Persons with Disabilities was published in 2017 by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. It covers a range of areas from access to information and communication to technical aids and equipment. However, this 2017 document has not yet been approved or implemented by the government (Jones & Serieux-Lubin, 2018).



- In 2013, CARICOM member States, including Trinidad, reaffirmed their commitment to the rights of persons with disabilities in the Declaration of Pétion-Ville<sup>2</sup> (CARICOM, 2013). In addition to committing to the development of national laws protecting persons with disabilities and the enhancement of national and regional policies and frameworks (Jones & Serieux-Lubin, 2018), signatories agreed to support families of persons with disabilities and to establish a mechanism to ensure monitoring and assessment of progress.

This support for international conventions related to the rights of persons with disabilities and legislation that has been passed to date signals the government's desire to enhance the well-being of persons with disabilities. However, some of these steps are aspirational rather than concrete, and enabling legislation and regulations are needed beyond the current legislative provisions, if businesses, social services and other organizations are to be made accountable for following through.

## **Government funding for programmes**

While the government programmes for people with disabilities are sometimes oversubscribed (Webb, 2017)—demand outpaces supply, a number of initiatives designed to meet the needs of people with disabilities have been implemented. The government of Trinidad & Tobago funds a number of programmes for persons with disabilities including the following, which are listed on its website: bus service for the disabled (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2018); bus tours and charters; clothing grant; disability assistance; emergency cases fund; free bus pass; geriatric adolescent partnership programme (GAPP); geriatric in-home care in Tobago; hardship relief programme; home help grant; legal aid; national social development programme (NSDP); old age pension; pharmaceutical grant; public assistance; social welfare division offices; and a targeted conditional cash transfer programme.

For example, ELDAMO (Elderly and Differently-abled Mobile), is a government service that provides persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago with the opportunity to move around their cities. This free bus service is available to people who are unable to use public transport. One part of the service is designed to allow persons with physical disabilities to get to work. It involves buses operating on routes within the major cities in the morning and afternoon. Another part of the service operates by arrangement and is designed to allow people to go to government offices, medical appointments and other destinations. Anyone with a disability can call and schedule a pick-up at their home. However, it is not provided in rural areas.

The government provides partial and project funding to a number of non-profit organisations—some examples include:

- Fees are paid for students attending the National Centre for Persons with Disabilities vocational education programmes, although the Centre must carry out some fundraising activities to cover operational expenses.

- The government supported the Blind Way Forward, an organization that provides services to people with vision impairments. The initial project funded was for the distribution of an audio book which explains what resources are available and how tasks may be accomplished using these resources.
- Funding was also provided to the Caribbean Kids and Therapy Organisation (CKFTO), a non-profit that provides pediatric assessment and treatment for children with developmental, physical, communicational and cognitive challenges and offers subsidies to families that meet its criteria. (Tremaine, 2013).

## **Accessibility**

Building codes do not require new construction to be made accessible to persons with disabilities with the result that people with mobility limitations cannot enter many buildings (Jones and Serieux-Lubin, 2018). People with other types of disabilities may lack the cues to navigate easily (e.g., voice and braille instructions when entering an elevator or flashing red lights as well as a siren to indicate the need to exit the building). Although some work has taken place, streets and sidewalks are mostly not constructed with curb cuts and ramps.

## **Attitudes towards persons with disabilities**

Negative attitudes towards persons with disability continue to affect the opportunities available to them. Research has shown that when non-disabled members of the population know persons with disabilities they are more likely to focus on similarities than differences (Jones & Serieux-Lubin, 2018). Because children with disabilities are most likely to attend special schools, they are more likely to be identified as different and to see themselves as being different. Persons with disabilities may be subjected to verbal and other forms of abuse (Rolston, 2014).

Parents may not expend time and resources on children with disabilities because they lack education about disabilities and prioritise the needs of other family members whom they view as having a more hopeful future (Njelesani, Leckie, Drummond. & Cameron, 2015). Teachers in mainstream schools believe they are unprepared to work with students with disabilities (Longpre, 2016). Employers may not believe that persons with disability are capable of being fully productive.

On the positive side, disability issues appear to be relatively well covered in local media, and legislative and funding initiatives are described positively.

## **Digital Access**

Persons with disabilities have less digital access than other members of society. This is problematic because the Internet provides access to information about work, services offered by government, and educational opportunities, and is used for entertainment and social interaction. In the age bracket 18 to 39, over fifty percent of the population

reported using the Internet while just over thirty percent of persons with disabilities did (Jones & Serieux-Lubin, 2018). As would be expected, levels of use declined with age.

## Education

In general, the opportunities for education are expanding. Even with slower expansion in 2017, what is termed the education industry, which contributes a little over three percent of the country's GDP, is still expected to outperform the growth achieved in three of the past four years (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2017). This growth is occurring despite adjustments to fiscal expenditures on the Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses (GATE) programme.

Although the country is considered to have a well-educated population overall, Trinidad and Tobago has one of the largest differences in completion of secondary education between working age adults with and without disabilities in the Caribbean. In 2010, 50 percent of persons with disabilities had a secondary school education while 80 percent of persons without disabilities had completed secondary school (Longpre, 2016).

The majority of children with disabilities attend special schools because there is no requirement for mainstreaming that would require schools to accept students with disabilities and because many schools are not accessible—these schools often do not provide the same quality of education. Longpre (2016) indicates that segregated education adversely affects the preparation of students for integration into the broader society. Beckles and Hanson note:

*“Too many children with disabilities fall through the cracks of the education system and emerge from primary or secondary institutions unable to read, write and demonstrate essential life skills. Yet they are expected to earn their own living in the same job market as persons without disabilities who have not suffered for access to quality education suitable to their needs.”* (Beckles and Hanson, 2016, p. 5)

Although international organizations indicate that literacy rates for the general population in Trinidad and Tobago are high—99 percent in 2015, ALTA (Adult Literacy Tutors Association), a non-profit organisation, suggests that because these rates are based on self-reporting, the actual rate of literacy is around 78 percent for the general population (Guardian, 2016). They estimate that more than 22 percent of adults in Trinidad and Tobago are not able to cope with everyday reading and writing. A UNESCO study in 2018 found that the adult literacy rate for those with disabilities is always lower than for those without disabilities with the difference ranging from five to 41 percent lower in the countries studied (Montoya, 2018). Illiteracy in individuals results in limited employability, lower earnings when working, a dependence on social welfare—and for business, loss of productivity.

## Health Care

Caribbean countries including Trinidad and Tobago face a number of challenges in providing health care to persons with disabilities, including accessibility (medical buildings and physician’s offices may not be accessible) (Jones and Serieux-Lubin, 2018); lack of trained rehabilitation professionals, a number of whom leave to work in other countries after training; and less than optimum provision of assistive devices and technology, which are not provided as a matter of course so funding from charitable initiatives is often required.

## Employment

A combination of factors contributes to decreased participation in the formal work economy by persons with disabilities, including lower educational attainment, attitudes of employers, and lack of accessibility to places where work is being undertaken (Gayle-Geddes, 2016; Beckles & Hanson, 2014). Employers may not be aware of the actual productivity of persons with disabilities and they lack knowledge about the costs of accommodation (making changes that would allow such individuals to participate in work activities).

The official rate of unemployment in Trinidad and Tobago is relatively low at 3.4% in 2015. However, while almost 70 percent of persons without disabilities were identified in a 2010 census as being economically active—defined as having work—this was only true of 30 percent of persons with disabilities (Jones and Serieux-Lubin, 2018). Since most adults with disabilities are not in work, many are forced to rely on the Mean Monthly Invalidity Pension of TT\$1839 (US\$283), which is provided to roughly 4851 beneficiaries or Disability Assistance of TT \$1800 (US\$277) for people aged 18 and over, which is provided to approximately 20,000 beneficiaries (Jones & Serieux-Lubin, 2018).

When persons with disabilities were employed, they earned lower wages overall than people without disabilities. One study found that roughly 76.4 percent of persons with disabilities were in the two lowest income categories in Trinidad and Tobago, while 54.7 percent of those without disabilities were at the same levels. (Gayle-Geddes, 2016). Persons with disabilities also tended to engage in job seeking activities at a significantly lower rate than those without disabilities.

## Development Partner Activities

The initiatives of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago are part of a wider CARICOM effort to improve the lives of persons with disabilities.

Mainstreaming the Community’s disabilities agenda has been identified as a major area of focus (CARICOM, 2015).

In order to enable the full participation of persons with disabilities (PWDs) in the society and economy, national and regional stakeholders need reliable data to inform

and strengthen their programming targeting this vulnerable group. To address the deficit of disability data in the Region, the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) has approved a project to support disability assessments in Grenada, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, and **Trinidad and Tobago**. The project, announced in 2018, is designed to improve the collection of data related to the social integration of persons with disabilities in order to improve the information base on which decisions are made (CARICOM, 2018). The first phase of the intervention is expected to be implemented over a 30-month period. The findings of the assessments will enable CDB to develop more targeted evidence-based projects and knowledge products and services to support disability mainstreaming in the Region.

CARICOM is working with the Caribbean Telecommunications Union on a video-based telephone system for people with hearing limitations.

CARICOM has signed a memorandum of agreement with the Governments of Guyana and Cuba to create a Regional Training Centre in Guyana for the *“development and stimulation of children, adolescents and young people with special educational needs associated with disabilities.”*

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