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Inklusion in der internationalen Zusammenarbeit: Verpflichtung und Realität

Disability inclusive development' in international cooperation

Addressing accessibility and inclusion gaps in development

Von A.H. Monjurul Kabir

Systemic exclusions and discriminations create and sustain inequitable distribution of resources and unequal access to facilities, capabilities, and rights necessary for inclusive development. This is particularly constraining for disadvantaged and marginalized groups including persons with disabilities. They are directly discriminated against and stigmatized beyond structural exclusions by factors including geographical distance from services, lack of reasonable accommodation, language barriers, physical inaccessibility, expensive or exclusive technologies, unsupportive laws, and unhelpful policies. Advancing the rights of persons with disabilities and ensuring their inclusion in development, conflicts, humanitarian, and transition settings are therefore essential. This is critical to shape disability inclusive development in international cooperation.

Addressing accessibility and inclusion gaps in development

Pakistan - An 'orange' rally highlights women with disabilities are more vulnerable to crimes of violence and discrimination against them. Photo: © UN Women/Asfandyar Khan/flickr, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

The United Nations 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD 2006) affirms the inherent dignity and worth of persons with disabilities and calls for urgent action to address the impacts of exclusion, discrimination, and segregation. The CRPD represents a comprehensive international commitment to respect the rights of persons with disabilities in all areas of life, including civil, political, social, and economic, and to their protection in situations of conflict and humanitarian crises. In order to realize the full inclusion of persons with disabilities into all international cooperation efforts, it embraces the three foundational pillars of the UN System: to advance respect for human rights, ensure peace and freedom from violence, and promote international development.

However, the global development agenda, despite the agenda 2030's (SDGs) explicit focus on the principle of 'Leaving No One Behind (LNOB)', lacks both inclusive and intersectional approach, and accessibility. The intersection of gender and disability is a case in point (UN Women 2020).

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Gender responsive disability inclusion

Leveraging its Strategy for the Empowerment of Women and Girls with Disabilities: Towards Full and Effective Participation and Gender Equality (2018) UN-Women is aiming to strengthen its contribution to achieving the goal of gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls, including women and girls with disabilities. For example, in 2020, UN Women supported initiatives for the empowerment of women and girls with disabilities in over 67 countries through providing normative guidance, integrated policy advice, operation support and capacity development. It is worth outlining the goal of the strategy which is to "achieve empowerment and full, effective and meaningful participation and inclusion of women and girls with disabilities in all aspects of public, political, economic, cultural, social and family life, on an equal basis with all others, in the contexts of development, peace and security, humanitarian action, and human rights." The strategy is further strengthened by the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS, 2019) which provides the foundation for sustainable and transformative progress on disability inclusion through all pillars of the work of the United Nations. Through the Strategy, the organizations of the United Nations system reaffirm that the full and complete realization of the human rights of all persons with disabilities is an inalienable, integral, and indivisible part of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

A more gender and disability inclusive approach is required if women and girls with disabilities are going to have access to public, political, economic, social, and family life on an equal basis with all others. It is therefore critical that UN and non-UN entities forge collaboration to mainstream issues and solutions related to gender and disability within the UN system. UN Women seeks to create a paradigm shift, where women and girls with disabilities, in all their diversity, are considered equal partners across the development-humanitarian continuum. This means, for example, consulting them for any programmes that would affect their lives both in peace and conflicts, humanitarian, and transition settings. We must not forget that without neutral, independent, impartial, and inclusive humanitarian action many people and places will be left out of reach, behind military frontlines and political fault lines—blind spots.

Its multipronged approach builds on three key approaches:

- including women and girls with disabilities,
- mainstreaming gender and disability perspectives, and
- supporting initiatives targeting women and girls with disabilities. Improving the intersection of gender and disability in policies, within countries and on the ground can make a meaningful difference in current global development discourse which suffers from both inclusion and accessibility gaps.

 A disabled woman building her own house. Abu Shouk: Kaltoum Yakoub Issa, 19 years old, makes bricks for her new house in Abu Shouk camp for internally displaced people (IDP), in North Darfur. Kaltoum, originally from Jebel Seet (North Darfur), lost her left hand and part of the other was seriously bounded when her village was attacked and her house burnt ten years ago. It was when her family fled to Abu Shouk and was helped by International Rescue Committee (IRC) to get an artificial hand. However, during the last years, her parents moved away and she is now alone with one sister in the IDP camp, and struggling with her already useless prosthesis to build her own house. Photo by Albert Gonzalez Farran - UNAMID/flickr, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

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Living in a pandemic – a test case for inclusive development?

Disability-inclusive development means that all stages of development processes are inclusive of and accessible to persons with disabilities. It requires that all persons be afforded equal access to education, health care services, work and employment, and social protection, among others. However, this is under severe challenges during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 is more than a health crisis; it has been affecting social structures and networks, livelihoods, economies, and efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. It will also have medium- and long-term effects for years to come. This crisis has been disproportionately affecting persons with disabilities, who are often invisible, excluded, and more at risk of feeling the shocks from weak health, basic services, and social protection systems. For example, with COVID-19 vaccinations being rolled out around the world, concerns have raised about how persons with disabilities will access the vaccinations. Disability movements raised questions about prioritization of persons with disabilities and their support networks to vaccinations, accessibility of vaccination processes, related information and venues, and provision of vaccines on the basis of free and informed consent of all persons with disabilities.

The ravages of COVID-19 have particularly affected the lives and livelihoods of women and girls with disabilities from higher job losses, shrinking work hours, and greater care burdens. Access to essential services got negatively impacted. It has also increased the levels of all forms of violence against women including women with disabilities, with the development gains of decades reversed in multiple areas. This gets particularly worse in the countries in conflicts, post-conflict, and transition settings. Everyday barriers such as lack of physical accessibility, affordability of healthcare, discriminatory laws and stigma, and access to basic hygiene measures, are life threatening in a pandemic. Unfortunately, the global development cooperation still has not paid due attention to this.

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Achieving a more perfect global development agenda

'Disability Inclusive Development' in international cooperation is still at its early stage. While some progresses are being made, international actors' focus primarily has been on physical accessibility issues. Some of the actors are still viewing this from medical, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and charity angles. These narrow approaches do not do justice to the full spectrum of disabilities, mental health, and corresponding socio-economic and health challenges.

In addition to disability-sensitive policies and resources, governments should consider developing standalone disability-specific social protection schemes and budgets and consult people with disabilities at all stages of COVID-19 response and recovery plans — in policy development, programme planning and implementation. These expenditures must be tracked to ensure both accountability and sustainability. In this regard, targeted South-South and Triangular Cooperation (SSTC) can play a catalytic role in strengthening the voice of the global south for the visioning of disability inclusive, gender responsive global development agenda (UN Women 2017). The SSTC could also encourage more robust knowledge exchange and experiential learning from and among the middle and low-income countries. It has also enabled countries in middle income and both lower and upper middle-income countries to join forces on specific themes, producing faster progress (such as in vocational and skill development training), higher impact (such as on mine action in post-conflict and frozen conflict areas, inclusive food security in South Asia) and innovative tools (such as evaluating inclusive public

policies and assessing impacts in Latin America and the Child Protection Index in Eastern Europe). These successful examples can be contextualized and used in other regions keeping in mind specific needs and demands of persons with disabilities.

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It is impossible to genuinely achieve internationally agreed development goals without the inclusion and integration of the rights, well-being, and perspective of persons with disabilities in development efforts at national, regional, and international levels. The current pace of mainstreaming disability inclusion and intersecting gender and disability is simply not acceptable and must be expanded and expedited. There is a lot more work to be done. We must dedicate more resources and technical support, integrate innovative solutions through an intersectional lens, and develop additional normative guidance to create more enabling and accessible environments for persons with disabilities. We must do better in promoting behavioural change and ensuring reasonable accommodation in communities, workplaces and beyond. To strengthen accountability process and improve data driven decision making, we must be able to track allocation of resources made for disability inclusion.

Only then will we be walking the talk.

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The views expressed in this article do not necessarily represent the views of the organisations referred to. The opinions reflected herein are entirely author's own.

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