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Dignity and Respect for All: creating new norms, tackling stigma and ensuring non-discrimination



This paper briefly explores the global context to the discrimination and stigma that people with disabilities experience in low- and middle-income countries. It outlines some of the main challenges the international community faces for tackling both and considers ways forward. It will inform the plenary discussion on 'Dignity and Respect for All: creating new norms, tackling stigma and ensuring non-discrimination' at the Global Disability Summit on 24 July and serves as a background document for all attendees.

The Global Disability Summit is bringing the international community together to share learning, make new commitments and place inclusion for people with disabilities at the heart of international development. As well as Dignity and Respect for All, the Summit will focus on three further themes critical for inclusive development: Inclusion in Education, Routes to Economic Empowerment and Harnessing Technology and Innovation.

1. Introduction

Tackling stigma and discrimination experienced by people with disabilities is a crucial development and human rights issue. Discrimination on the basis of disability refers to any form of treatment that restricts people with disabilities' access to their rights.¹ The discrimination people with disabilities experience is often compounded by discrimination based on other identities such as gender, age, ethnicity, religion or migrant status.² People with disabilities also experience stigmatising attitudes. These are inaccurate perceptions and beliefs that can be widespread in society and can often result in and underpin exclusion, and sometimes exploitation, abuse and violence.³ People who are stigmatised are made to feel ashamed, and stigma is often one of the driving factors behind discrimination against people with disabilities.⁴ The families and carers of people with disabilities are also sometimes stigmatised or discriminated against by association.

Tackling disability discrimination, and the stigma that often accompanies it, will mean challenging laws and established practices to ensure the equal rights of people with disabilities in society are upheld and their full participation in political and public life is promoted. It will also mean working at all levels, from ministry to village, to transform the stigmatising attitudes of people that can lead to exclusion and the denial of rights.

2. The global framework

A number of global frameworks provide a roadmap for action for promoting non-discrimination. The **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** (CRPD) commits states to addressing discrimination and taking measures to combat stereotypes, prejudices and harmful practices. Through seeking to promote, protect and ensure the rights of all people with disabilities, the CRPD has led to legislative reforms that align to the principle of non-discrimination in a number of countries.⁵

The **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** offers a clear commitment to the principle of non-discrimination in its central pledge to “leave no one behind”. Disability is included in five goals and seven targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), generating momentum around the importance of ensuring people with disabilities play a leading role in national, regional and international development.⁶

The **Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction** emphasises the critical role people with disabilities can play in all stages of disaster risk reduction. It includes the opportunity to “build back better”, and adheres to the principles of non-discrimination, accessibility and universal design to strengthen resilience.⁷

3. Background

Attitudes to disability are not consistent within countries or across regions, and beliefs about disability can vary within communities and even families. They can differ depending on, for example, when and how an impairment was acquired and can interact with other attitudes and beliefs. However, there are common factors that shape both stigma and discrimination, including a lack of understanding of disability and its causes. This contributes to a wide range of negative assumptions and discriminatory beliefs.⁸

Stigma and discrimination exists at all levels of society. Within families, in some cases, parents may view children with disabilities as less valuable and so may not support their development or abandon them.⁹ Communities can shun people with disabilities, leading them to become ‘invisible’ in society.

Discrimination can also affect the way some people with disabilities perceive themselves, resulting in low self-esteem and self-worth, and exacerbating the exclusion, violence, exploitation and abuse they experience.¹⁰

Discrimination can affect all areas of life. Discriminatory legislation and policies exacerbates the exclusion of people with disabilities from decision-making processes and other areas of life.¹¹

Discrimination and stigma affect individuals in diverse ways depending on their impairment, gender, socioeconomic and cultural background, and other characteristic and contexts. Due to discriminatory factors such as malnutrition and child marriage¹² – as well as a higher life expectancy – the prevalence of disability among women is nearly 50% higher than that among men.¹³ Girls with disabilities are less likely to access education. The employment rate of women with disabilities is more than 30% lower than that for men with disabilities¹⁴. Women with disabilities face a risk of intimate partner violence between two and four times greater than that for women without a disability.¹⁵ Inaccessible public health information and discrimination from health workers affects the access to essential services for women and girls with disabilities. The discriminatory context in which women and girls with disabilities find themselves can result in families being over-protective and so further restricting their rights.¹⁶

Older people with disabilities often experience discrimination based upon both their disability and age. Older women may be denied access to property and land, owing to the triple discriminatory burden of gender, age and disability.¹⁷ Poverty, environmental degradation and violence experienced by indigenous peoples result in higher rates of disability in these communities as well as the denial of access to services and justice.¹⁸ People with albinism are often targeted as a result of deep-rooted discriminatory beliefs, such as that their body parts can bring good fortune. This is particularly common around certain events, such as elections.¹⁹

People with psychosocial disabilities experience high levels of discrimination and particularly high rates of violence.²⁰ This is one reason why only 15-25% of people with psychosocial disabilities seek support in low and middle-income countries.²¹ Societal stigma can result in people with psychosocial disabilities being segregated, tied up in their homes and institutionalised with no right to appeal and at high risk of experiencing violence.²²

People with intellectual disabilities also face particular discrimination around informed consent and involuntary treatment as the discriminatory context extends to their being denied autonomy and legal capacity.

4. Challenges to tackling discrimination

Discrimination is an everyday experience for people with disabilities. They face particular challenges in the following areas:

Education

Discrimination is a major barrier for children with disabilities accessing education.²³ Up to 50% of children with disabilities are out of school.²⁴ Families are likely to prioritise their other children or keep children with disabilities out of school to protect them.²⁵ Mainstream schools may refuse children with disabilities, believing they are unable to learn. Many schools lack appropriate learning materials, are inaccessible and have a shortage of appropriately trained teachers.²⁶ The labels given to children in the education system can be highly stigmatising, making children reluctant to reveal impairments and meaning they miss out on support services.²⁷ Bullying and violence from both students and teachers are common. *For further discussion, see the Global Summit paper on Inclusion in Education.*

Economic empowerment

People with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed, lower paid, work informally and have less job security than people without disabilities.²⁸ Misconceptions often mean employers underestimate the capabilities of people with disabilities or view requests for reasonable accommodation as a problem.²⁹ Other factors that restrict economic empowerment include discriminatory rules around land ownership that prevent people with disabilities from inheriting or owning property.³⁰ *For further discussion, see the Global Summit paper on Routes to Economic Empowerment.*

Technology

Technological innovation has the potential to drive greater inclusion. However, inaccessibility as a result of a shortage of availability, high cost, and a lack of financing, awareness and trained personnel mean only one in ten people have access to the assistive technology (AT) they require.³¹ Anti-discrimination laws often include accessibility requirements, but may not specifically include information and communication technology (ICT), resulting in exclusion from virtual and digital environments.³² People with disabilities may not, for example, be able to access job applications and official registrations and can miss out on emergency warning and public information campaigns.³³ *For further discussion, see the Global Summit paper on Harnessing Technology and Innovation.*

Disasters, emergencies and conflicts

People with disabilities face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination during disasters, humanitarian emergencies and conflicts.³⁴ People with disabilities are often denied access to food, water and relief, and may be left behind during evacuations.³⁵ People with disabilities are at a risk of violence and abuse in shelters and refugee camps. This is particularly the case for women and girls with disabilities due to existing discrimination and the lack of separate spaces in shelters.³⁶

Development efforts

Inaccessible relief distribution reflects broader exclusion from development interventions. Stigma means people with disabilities may not be invited to consultations or receive information that they are taking place. Even where family members participate, stigma may prevent them raising issues. Community workers can feel it is not possible to discuss disability openly. The result can be development programmes that risk furthering exclusion.³⁷

Data

Discrimination contributes to the lack of data and evidence on disability. In particular, individuals often remain hidden from official statistics, as they are not reported to survey collectors. This contributes to under-estimations of disability prevalence, resulting in planning and resource allocation that exacerbates discrimination.³⁸ Sometimes, the discriminatory attitudes of public officials and institutions simply mean people with disabilities are not prioritised when it comes to resource allocation.³⁹

5. Delivering dignity and respect for all

Eradicating discrimination and stigma requires a range of actions. The following areas are likely to require consideration:

The enabling environment

Despite the existence of global frameworks for non-discrimination, inequality often remains 'enshrined in law'.⁴⁰ Existing anti-discrimination laws and policies can be strengthened to ensure they address intersecting discrimination and lay the foundations for change. Where no suitable laws

exist, new laws and policies can be adopted. Integrating reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities into all appropriate legislation – including electoral, education, employment and early warning systems – furthers non-discrimination.⁴¹

Implementation

Where appropriate policies do exist, there are often significant gaps in implementation. New and strengthened laws and policies should be accompanied by implementation measures, including minimum standards and guidelines for non-discrimination,⁴² adequate budgets and appropriate safeguards.⁴³ National human rights and disability bodies play a crucial role in monitoring implementation and reporting discrimination. Ensuring they are resourced to provide technical guidance and facilitate access to justice will help address discrimination.

Participation and leadership

Effective representation of a diverse range of people with disabilities, at all levels of society and in decision-making, can challenge stereotypes and ultimately address discrimination. Groups and networks of people with disabilities, and of their families, can be a crucial way to build confidence, overcome stigma and support people with disabilities to claim their rights.⁴⁴ Due to high levels of discrimination, Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) may lack resources, capacity and influence. Yet the participation and leadership of people with disabilities in public and political life can lead to transformative change.⁴⁵ By working with people with disabilities, development actors can ensure all development and emergency responses are inclusive and address intersectional discrimination.

Awareness raising

Raising awareness of the rights of people with disabilities can help to tackle misconceptions and remind development actors of their obligations.⁴⁶ Directly raising stigma as a discussion topic can encourage people to reflect and challenge their own prejudices. Disability awareness training for public officials can help change attitudes and lead to practices that are more inclusive. Working with parents of children with disabilities, raising awareness among classmates, and forming networks between schools, parent associations and DPOs all help to address stigma.⁴⁷ Mass media can be used alongside other interventions to increase connections between people with disabilities and the wider public.⁴⁸ Sport is one example that can change the way communities view people with disabilities, as well as how people with disabilities think about themselves. Using role models and community leaders to publicise change that has been achieved can help further transform people's attitudes towards disability.⁴⁹

Education and employment

Ensuring the participation of people with disabilities in appropriate education and skill training can not only provide pathways to economic empowerment, but can also help to change perceptions, including of how people with disabilities view themselves.⁵⁰ Employers can address discrimination by developing clear policies for addressing stigma, bullying and harassment, and providing reasonable accommodation to individuals and caregivers.⁵¹

Technology

Innovative and accessible technologies, including appropriate assistive technologies (AT), can help to address discriminatory barriers to participation. Such AT includes voice recognition, magnification and text-to-speech functionality; message, relay and caption services; hands-free navigation and gesture-controlled interfaces. The challenge is to ensure equitable access.⁵²

Data

More accurate disability data can be the first step to identifying discriminatory barriers and better resource allocation. Methodologies for collecting disability disaggregated data, including the Washington Group Question Sets, have been developed that provide standardised data in non-discriminatory ways.⁵³ Quantitative data should be complemented with qualitative data to give insights into the lived experiences of people with disabilities.

6. Questions for consideration

The Global Disability Summit is an opportunity to catalyse political will and ensure people with disabilities are driving the change required to make inclusive development a reality. The following discussion points are intended to help us clarify ideas and develop next steps in the mission to ensure dignity and respect for all.

- What strategies have been most effective in ensuring anti-discrimination laws and policies are in place and implemented, and that actions resulting from them are sustained?
 - What national and local initiatives have been effective at challenging harmful attitudes and practices against people with disabilities?
 - How can we better collaborate to eliminate stigma and discrimination and realise transformative change for people with disabilities?
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