

Disability and Development

David Cobley
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More than one billion people (around 15% of the world's population) are disabled, with 80% of them living in the global South, estimates the first ever World Report on Disability, jointly published by the WHO and World Bank in 2011. Furthermore, disabled people are disproportionately represented among the poor, have higher levels of unmet health needs, and are more than twice as likely as non-disabled people to be unemployed, in countries for which data is available. Disabled children are particularly disadvantaged, with higher mortality rates and lower rates of school attendance and completion than non-disabled children. In fact, with disabled children representing over a third of those children currently excluded from schooling, the goal of universal primary education cannot come close to being achieved without addressing the factors that give rise to their exclusion.

Disability and international development have traditionally been regarded as separate fields, with development policy, planning and programming often failing to take account of disability issues. The 2000 Millennium Framework does not mention disability at all, despite the publication of a much-cited World Bank-commissioned paper in 1999 claiming that up to 20% of the world's poor were disabled. The two fields are now gradually coming together, with a growing acceptance that global development targets cannot be achieved unless disability is treated as a cross-cutting, priority issue, in much the same way as gender has been for many years now. The recently unveiled post-2015 development framework reflects this aspiration, with targets relating to five of the seventeen sustainable development goals explicitly referring to disability.

This shift has come about largely through the efforts of disabled people themselves, who have articulated their own experiences and challenged society to be more flexible and accommodating. Disabled People's International, an international network of disabled people's organisations



Dr David Cobley is a Teaching Fellow at the International Development Department, University of Birmingham. He has conducted research on various disability-related topics in Uganda, Kenya, Sierra Leone, India, and the Philippines, and is currently co-supervising a doctoral disability research project on disability and employment at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. David holds a doctorate in International Development (University of Birmingham, 2012) and has recently written three journal articles on: disability and livelihoods in Kenya; the implementation of the CRPD in India and a forthcoming article on disability and disaster recovery in the Philippines. He has worked for over 20 years as a Care Manager within the UK disability sector and has established his own residential care service in Birmingham for adults with sensory and intellectual impairments.

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(DPOs) founded in 1981 has worked closely with the UN on the drafting of several major international agreements, including the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the first major human rights treaty of the twenty-first century. Now ratified by 157 states, the CRPD provides a legally-binding international framework designed to protect the rights of disabled people and to promote their participation in all aspects of society, thus putting them on a more equal footing with other social groups within society that frequently face discrimination, such as women, children and migrant workers. Many states have followed up ratification by introducing anti-discrimination legislation and policy measures designed to achieve these aims.

While much progress has been made, particularly within the legislative and policy arenas, the ideals of inclusive development and full participation will not become a reality unless disability-inclusive policies and programmes are readily accepted and effectively implemented. For this to happen, society itself needs to be radically reshaped. Disabling barriers, such as stigmatising attitudes and beliefs, inaccessible infrastructure and discriminatory processes need to be systematically dismantled. Most importantly, disabled people and the organisations that represent them need to be at the forefront of their own development and empowerment. DPOs have a crucial role to play in this process, but often lack the capacity to effectively support and represent their own members, let alone the wider community of disabled people. One important challenge for development agencies is to strengthen these organisations, so they can participate more effectively in the development process.

Addressing the widespread exclusion of disabled people around the world is clearly a human rights issue, but also makes sound economic sense. The loss of productivity resulting from the exclusion of disabled people from education and employment, coupled with the resulting loss of taxes and the economic burden placed on state welfare systems, is hard to quantify but places a significant strain on the already overstretched economies of many low income countries. When the non-economic costs of disability, such as social isolation and the reinforcement of negative perceptions of disabled people as incapable and non-contributors, are also taken into account, a powerful case can be made for promoting the inclusion and empowerment of disabled people. This does not necessarily have to be at the expense of other important development priorities. Many of the issues and concerns facing disabled people, such as exclusion from health, education and employment, are similar to those faced by poor people in general. Promoting disability-inclusive development can have benefits for whole societies, not just disabled people and their families. For example, accessible public buildings can be of great benefit to elderly people and those with young children. Inclusive education is about ensuring that mainstream learning environments are responsive to the needs of all learners, not just about adapting them to meet the needs of disabled children. By mainstreaming disability into all areas of development assistance, general poverty and exclusion issues can be addressed in a way that does not leave out disabled people.

Key readings

The following readings explore core issues and debates within the emerging field of disability and development,

Shakespeare, T. & Watson, N. (2002). The Social Model of Disability: An Outdated Ideology?. *Research in Social Science and Disability* 2, 9-28.

<http://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/files/library/Shakespeare-social-model-of-disability.pdf>

The social model of disability, which arose from within the UK disability movement, locates disability firmly within society. It provides a rallying point for disabled people around the world to challenge discrimination and assume more positive identities, within the collective context of the disability movement. However, the simple dichotomy between disability and impairment underpinning the social model has been called into question by some commentators, particularly in relation to southern contexts, where disability often arises from preventable diseases. This conceptual paper provides an excellent critique of the 'strong' version of the social model, reflecting ongoing debates around the perceived failure of the social model to take account of the disabling impact of impairment.

Groce, N., Kenbhavi, G., Wirz, S., Lang, R., Trani, JF and Kett, M. (2011). *Poverty and Disability: A Critical Review of the Literature in Low and Middle Income Countries*. London: Leonard Cheshire Disability

http://www.ucl.ac.uk/lc-ccr/centrepublishations/workingpapers/WP16_Poverty_and_Disability_review.pdf

This extensive literature review concludes that there is currently insufficient evidence to firmly establish the nature of causal mechanisms that reinforce the known links between disability, poverty and health in Low-Middle Income Countries. Building this evidence base is vital to ensuring that, as global development policy and planning processes increasingly take account of disability issues and nation states strive to implement the CRPD, these processes are adequately informed.

Soldatic, K. and Grech, S. (2014) . Transnationalising disability studies: rights, justice and impairment. *Disability Studies Quarterly* 34(2)

<http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/4249/3588>

The CRPD is widely hailed as a landmark achievement for the worldwide disability movement, signifying a major breakthrough in terms of drawing attention to the injustices faced by disabled people around the world. This paper recognises the significance of the CRPD, while also considering some of its limitations. For example, by framing disability justice within the realm of the 'modern territorial state', the CRPD fails to adequately address injustices faced by those disabled people, such as refugees and asylum seekers, who are not full citizens of the countries in which they reside. Another interesting limitation arises from the CRPD's framing of disability in terms of societal discrimination, in line with the social model of disability, with impairment assumed to arise from natural causes. As the authors point out, this means that the CRPD fails to allow for justice claims around the human creation of impairment through transnational processes, such as military interventions or the forces of global capitalism.

Barnes, C. & Sheldon, A. (2010). Disability, politics and poverty in a majority world context. *Disability and Society* 25(7), 771-782.

http://education.praguesummerschools.org/files/education/hatras_4.pdf

This thought-provoking discussion paper questions the extent to which legal frameworks, such as the CRPD, can bring about meaningful social change. Barnes and Sheldon argue that the international disability movement should seek to forge links with other political and oppressed groups, in order to challenge the global structures and values that create and perpetuate injustice and inequality.

Grech, S. (2014). Disability, poverty and education: perceived barriers and (dis)connections in rural Guatemala. *Disability and the Global South* 1(1), 128-152.

<http://disabilityglobalsouth.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/dgs-01-01-081.pdf>

This study challenges the assumption that access to education necessarily alleviates poverty for disabled children and their families. It also highlights the potential value of special schools in a context where accessibility concerns are virtually ignored within mainstream provision.

Hemingway, L. and Priestley, M. (2007). Disability and disaster recovery: a tale of two cities?. *Review of Disability Studies* 2(3), 57-67.

[http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/1969/1/priestleym4_A_Tale_of_Two_Cities_\(Int_J_Dis_Soc_Work_and_Rehab_2006\).pdf](http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/1969/1/priestleym4_A_Tale_of_Two_Cities_(Int_J_Dis_Soc_Work_and_Rehab_2006).pdf)

Conflicts and natural disasters increase the prevalence of disability, as well as having a disproportionate impact on disabled people living in disaster-prone areas. Despite this, disaster planning processes pay insufficient attention to the specific needs of disabled people, in part, due to a frequent failure to consult with disabled people and the organisations that represent them. This article draws on empirical evidence from the Asian Tsunami and Hurricane Katrina to argue for post-disaster reconstruction processes to prioritise the removal of disabling environmental barriers, rather than simply focusing on addressing the impairment-based needs of disabled people, as well as highlighting the potential role of DPOs in disaster planning and recovery.

Questions to guide readings

- To what extent is the social model of disability a relevant and useful conceptual tool for reducing poverty among disabled people in LMICs?
- To what extent does available evidence support claims of a close relationship between disability and poverty? In which specific areas are further research needed, in order to deepen our understanding of the complexities of this relationship?
- What are the possible consequences, positive and negative, of promoting universal disability rights, in line with legal frameworks such as the CRPD, around the world? What kind of tensions may exist between universal and local values, particularly in LMICs?
- How can the disability movement be supported to play a greater role in promoting disability rights around the world, in order to create the necessary conditions for reducing poverty among disabled people?
- What are the main barriers to inclusive education in LMICs, and how can they be overcome?
- What do you see as the future role of special education, in the light of the international drive towards inclusive education?
- What differences and similarities emerge from the Asian Tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, in terms of disabled people's experiences before and after these natural disasters? How can disabled people themselves play a more active role in disaster planning and recovery?