

Disability Funders Network

Disability and Inclusive Societies

Inclusion is a defining issue, situated at the crossroads where human rights, civil rights, education, economic productivity, health, child development, and representative democracy meet. While the term inclusion can be defined as integration, it is more specifically used to denote active welcoming and support for the participation of people with disabilities rather than their physical presence alone. It suggests that physical and attitudinal barriers should be removed and that society, rather than the person with the disability, should adapt. When disability is approached as a social construct rather than a personal barrier, energy and resources are freed for the creation of more just and sustainable societies.

People with disabilities need to be included in the domains of education, housing, and employment, as well as political participation and meaningful roles in everyday community activities. The establishment of inclusion as a human rights principle acts as an antidote to the medical model of disability, which traditionally presumed and often enforced policies of exclusion. Relegated to segregated settings, people with disabilities were expected to “earn” their way to citizenship and community participation based on clinically-defined criteria for “readiness” that abrogated their personal choices and failed to tap their vast economic and social potential.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 10% of the world’s population, nearly 600 million people, have a sensory, physical, intellectual or mental health disability. About 200 million of these are children. These numbers are expected to grow due to factors such as aging, the effects of HIV/AIDS, armed conflict and its aftermath, and natural disasters, along with medical advances that improve survival rates post disabling incident. It is not rare or unusual to be born with or acquire a disability, and to be fully included in society as a person with a disability is not an outcome confined to income-rich countries. Recognizing that poverty and the challenges of disability reinforce each other, many of the world’s poorest countries are finding that it is cost-effective to break the cycle by investing in inclusive practices.

The opportunity to build governmental, policy, administrative, economic, and social infrastructures that include all members of society offers NGOs and grantmakers a strong vehicle for the simultaneous advancement of the many constituencies for which they work. This inclusion can be achieved by requiring that input by and outcomes for people with disabilities be incorporated into all activities as a prerequisite to their funding and implementation. Efforts dedicated to inclusion have the growth potential of creating natural allies among marginalized populations, bringing forth new voices and leadership to support these efforts. The inclusion of people with disabilities becomes a benchmark of good governance that benefits all citizens.

The Impact of Exclusion

Promoting inclusion offers grantmakers an effective point of impact on both poverty and its concomitant health and environmental problems that contribute to the impact of disability. Poverty leads to and perpetuates the exclusion of people with disabilities. According to World Bank estimates, people with disabilities account for up to one in five of the world's poorest people. Approximately 90 % of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school. People with disabilities living in poverty are at risk for malnutrition, disease, and exposure to pollution and other environmental hazards.

Humans are social beings, and social relationships are now understood to be essential to cognitive and emotional development and the maintenance of mental health across the lifespan. The exclusion of children with disabilities from interacting with typically-developing peers, and often from the nurturing support of their families as well, can exacerbate developmental delays and lead to potentially irreversible psychological damage. There is also a close connection between the isolation of people with disabilities in segregated, hidden-away places and a heightened incidence of abuse and neglect. For example, recent efforts in the U.S. and other nations aimed at eliminating the use of dangerous restraint and seclusion techniques on children with disabilities have demonstrated the difficulty of enforcing protections in settings where conditions are invisible to the public. Women and girls with disabilities, who face the added risk of gender-based discrimination, are more vulnerable to domestic and sexual violence when they lack connection with their communities. A review carried out for the UN Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children found that children with disabilities are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system, where they often fare far worse than their peers who are non-disabled.

When inclusive infrastructures and practices for people with disabilities are not in place, the social construct of disability can become a proxy for other types of discrimination. For example, although racial and ethnic segregation is not permitted in public schools in the United States, a disproportionate number of students of color are identified by the schools as disabled. This labeling results in the segregation of many of these students into separate classrooms and facilities where educational outcomes are significantly lower, contributing to the disproportionate number of students of color who will experience economic hardship and further segregation within the penal system in adulthood. Segregation based on gender issues, sexual orientation, advanced age and other differences may also proceed under the guise of "treatment" of a disability. The only effective strategy for stopping the spread of these forms of hidden discrimination is to assure that people with disabilities are included in their communities and societies, and that disability can never be used as an excuse for denying human rights.

| Today's Challenges | Tomorrow's Opportunities | |
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| OUTREACH | People with disabilities are "off the radar screen" and not actively involved in the lives of most communities. | Shared entry to inclusive services replaces parallel systems, enhancing the exchange of information. |
| ACCESSIBILITY | The design of typical community settings creates barriers to participation; retrofitting of unusable technology and structures can be expensive and time-consuming. | Planning for access makes communities safer and more inviting for all. Families can stay together when housing and transportation respond to the changing needs of their members. |
| VALUED ROLES | Overt and hidden forms of discrimination are fueled by "medical model" beliefs that "fixing" disability is a prerequisite to inclusion. | As people with disabilities move into leadership roles, their ability to offer creative solutions to social challenges is valued. |
| EFFICACY | Low expectations and charity-based perceptions lead to inadequate data and accountability. | Inclusive practices support the users of services and systems to set high standards for effectiveness. |

A Funding Opportunity

The 2007 adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities firmly places disability on the human rights agenda. It is now clear that governments, NGOs, international agencies and grantmakers should address the inclusion of people with disabilities in their projects, planning, and policy-making activities. This can be done in two ways:

1. Requiring proposals to specify the ways in which people with disabilities will be included and positively impacted.
2. Including people with disabilities in the development and leadership of all projects and activities they support and undertake.

Promoting inclusion moves funders and economies beyond charity-based and welfare-based responses to disability, marking an end to wasteful and expensive parallel systems of service provision. It does away with the inefficiency and discrimination imposed when services for people with disabilities are organized differently from those for people without disabilities. It is becoming increasingly clear that when people with disabilities are included in the work of both traditional human rights communities, as well as the work of proponents of economic, social, and cultural advancement, everyone benefits.