

An NGO Opportunity

Human rights actors can enhance the effectiveness of current programs by including people with disabilities. Due to its cross-sectoral nature and connection with multiple forms of discrimination, disability is relevant to the constituencies that many groups care about, including women, ethnic minorities, refugees and the poor.

Across issue areas, NGOs often strive to reach marginalized populations to achieve social change. By widening the circle of inclusion to include people with disabilities, NGOs can advance a rights-promoting culture to the benefit of all. The goal is not necessarily projects that only help people with disabilities; the goal is projects to help all people, including people with disabilities.

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Astraea Lesbian
Foundation for Justice,
Global Fund for Women
and True North Foundation

Disability Funders Network

DFN was established in 1994 to create a new understanding of how private funders can integrate disability concerns into their philanthropic programs. You are invited to take full advantage of DFN's resources and expertise.

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Human Rights and Disability: Embracing a paradigm shift

An NGO Opportunity



DISABILITY FUNDERS NETWORK

The Social Justice Movement of the 21st Century ...
Building a Bridge Between Disability and Community Philanthropy

Disability on the Human Rights Agenda

Beyond health and charity to a rights-based approach

When thinking about disability, it is not uncommon for people to conceptualize it as a health, medical, or welfare issue. Such views are consistent with traditional approaches to disability, where the problems faced by people with disabilities are typically attributed to their individual physical, mental or intellectual characteristics, rather than to societal barriers and discrimination. Over the last several decades, however, people with disabilities have pioneered a paradigm shift, resulting in the emergence of disability as an established issue on the international human rights agenda.

The “social model” of disability, which asserts that societies should not remedy the problems of people with disabilities by trying to change or “fix” disabled individuals themselves, has propelled disability onto the human rights agenda. Instead of focusing on disabilities per se, societies should remove the physical, attitudinal, legislative, communication and other barriers that have denied people with disabilities their rightful place as full and equal participants in society. Arguably, a social model can be most effectively implemented through a human rights approach that promotes a life of dignity and respect for all people on the basis of their inherent humanity, regardless of their individual characteristics.

The 2007 adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) firmly placed disability on the human rights agenda. It is now clear that all human rights actors, whether governments, NGOs, international agencies or funders, have a role to play in addressing the human rights of people with disabilities in their programs and activities. They have a powerful new tool to advocate for the rights that people with disabilities have long been denied. For example, the CRPD provides specific protections for women and girls with disabilities, requiring signatories to support their growth and empowerment in order to guarantee that they enjoy their human rights under the Convention.

A Diverse Population

When considering how to include people with disabilities in policies and programs, human rights actors often express confusion as to *who* they should be including. This is understandable given that there is no internationally recognized definition of disability. The preamble of the CRPD states that: “disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”

Thus, people with disabilities are not disabled by their own physical, mental, sensory or intellectual qualities, but by societal barriers that fail to respect and accommodate them as individuals. In this way, disability is a social construct, like race or ethnicity. Disability is also cross-sectoral, impacting people of *all* ages, races, genders, religions, sexual preferences, or

other socio-economic status. Many face multiple forms of discrimination, such as women and girls with disabilities who may experience both disability and gender-based discrimination. They also experience much higher rates of violence and abuse including sexual violence

The cross-sectoral nature of disability can at first seem overwhelming, as so many people are potentially implicated. The goal, though, is not to create separate programs for people with disabilities, but rather to make existing programs disability-inclusive. For example, a group addressing the human rights of girls can become disability-inclusive through incorporation of girls with disabilities in its policies and programs.

Through simple adaptations and increased awareness, all human rights actors can help to ensure that people with disabilities remain firmly on the human rights agenda.

Human rights programs should be explicitly designed to include people with disabilities

	Today's Obstacles	Tomorrow's Opportunities
Outreach	People with disabilities have limited access to information about human rights programs, litigation and services.	Develop public information campaigns readily available to people with disabilities using a variety of accessible formats, media and languages.
Accessibility	Physical and information barriers exclude people with disabilities from locations, programs and services addressing human rights.	Remove or avoid physical and information barriers through implementation of universal design principles and provision of specific accommodations where needed.
Stigma	Attitudes often form the greatest barriers to inclusion of people with disabilities as full members of society. Such attitudes often invoke fear or shame.	Create programs and policies intended to raise awareness and overcome stigma, stereotyping and prejudice against people with disabilities, including multiple discrimination such as that faced by women, ethnic, sexual minorities
Evaluation	People with disabilities and disability perspectives are often left out of program evaluation processes, even when the objectives seek to reach marginalized populations.	Ensure that evaluation processes capture the efficacy of programs in benefiting people with disabilities, including feedback from people with disabilities, and that lessons learned also extend to people with disabilities.