

DISABILITY & INCLUSION

How We Got Here: Our Working Notes

[We recognize that language surrounding disability is evolving and personal to the individual. At present, there is no one universally embraced label to discuss those who live with a physical, sensory, or mental condition. For the purposes of these working notes, we are using the terms “people with disabilities” and “disabled people,” while acknowledging the current discourse surrounding person-first and identity-first language.]

Overview

One of the principles behind the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals is “leave no one behind.” This includes the more than 1 billion people with disabilities globally. Humanitarian and development organizations will only truly contribute to this goal when we are educated and equipped to hire disabled staff; and when we design and implement programs that are informed by, and meaningfully accessible to, people with disabilities.

Beginning with the definition used by the **World Health Organization** (WHO), disability “results from the interaction between individuals with a health condition such as cerebral palsy, down syndrome, and depression [with] personal and environmental factors including negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social support.” The importance of the WHO definition is that it recognizes disability as not an individual but a communal responsibility. While there are multiple legal frameworks and policies designed to support the participation of people with disabilities within communities—for example, the **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**—actual actions to change the way people with disabilities are viewed and treated in their societies are lacking and insufficient.

It is important to remember that types of disabilities vary greatly. Disability can be visible (e.g., someone who uses a wheelchair) or invisible (e.g., someone who is deaf, has a mental health diagnosis, or has chronic pain). As such, strategies for accessibility, meaningful engagement, and equity within the NGO sector must be equally wide and varied to ensure that people with diverse needs have access to their entitlements, to decision-making platforms, and to information. Put simply, people with disabilities must be given access to everything that their non-disabled counterparts are given access by default.

Impact

Intentional or not, Western society is inherently ableist and has constructed a system that commonly overlooks or actively disregards the inclusion of people with disabilities. Ableism is defined by **Access Living** as “discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior...ableism is rooted in the assumption that disabled people require ‘fixing’ and defines people by their disability.” One marker of ableism is the idea that it is the responsibility of each disabled person to break down access and engagement barriers on their own, rather than the responsibility of a society to design itself in an inclusive manner. Similarly, it is the responsibility of all our organizations to

counter ableism within the NGO community by ensuring accessibility, meaningful participation, and equity for disabled staff and program participants alike.

Intersectionality of Disability

Inclusion of people with disabilities is important for all communities and organizations, but it is especially critical to the mission of humanitarian and development organizations. While disability is part of the human condition—almost everyone will be temporarily or permanently compromised at some point in their lives—disability disproportionately affects vulnerable populations. Because disability is found within the interplay between specific health conditions and societal norms, people with disabilities are often not viewed as a priority, and as a result, policies and funding are lacking.

On an external front, Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) have been around for decades to provide disabled people both the space to voice their needs and other priorities and a role in decision-making. Through these organizations, disabled people are representing themselves to the government, service providers, and the public to gain the rights to access to all services and remove the barriers that prevent them. NGOs can elevate the voices of disabled people by supporting and forming relationships with local OPDs and using them as a valuable resource to identify the different types of disability in the community. For example, one way to ensure that people with disabilities are visible and included in all aspects of the humanitarian and development sector is by inviting OPDs to participate in the program planning and implementation process or by promoting the activities of OPDs. Internally, having budgets dedicated specifically to disability-related needs will ensure that organizations have the financial capacity to offer disability inclusive programs and meet other accommodations (e.g., sign language interpreters, removing physical barriers, purchasing or renting assistive technology, etc.), while also better including people with disabilities among program staff.

Policies & Programming

In 2011, the World Health Organization and the World Bank Group jointly produced the [**World Report on Disability**](#) to “provide the evidence for progressive policies and programs that can improve the lives of people with disabilities.” The findings were stark. Children with disabilities are less likely to start school, stay in school, and be promoted in school. As adults, disabled people are more likely to be unemployed and get paid less than their non-disabled counterparts when they are employed. Moreover, disabled people are less likely to be looked to as leaders and partners—especially in all phases of international development and humanitarian assistance. People with disabilities have higher rates of poverty, worse health outcomes, and restricted participation in the public arena. As a way to address this issue on a global scale, the World Health Assembly has recently adopted Humanity and Inclusion’s [**Resolution on the Highest Attainable Standard of Health for Persons with Disabilities**](#). This resolution reaffirms the right of persons with disabilities to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health, with no discrimination and on the basis of free and informed consent.

Inclusive Practices

To ensure that your organization is truly inclusive of people with disabilities, consider the following when it comes to current policies and practices surrounding hiring, decision-making structures, and project implementation:

1. **Accessibility:** Are you providing or enabling an environment that supports people with disabilities?
Sample questions to ask yourself/your organization:
 - Can people with disabilities access your recruitment posts?
 - Is our external website and internal Intranet visually accessible when it comes to font size, color/color contrast, screen readers, etc.?
 - What other accommodations can we provide to encourage people with disabilities to apply to our positions? (e.g., interviews conducted in sign language, job postings in e-reader friendly formats, etc.)
2. **Meaningful engagement with staff:** Are you engaging with staff with disabilities at the same level as their non-disabled counterparts?
Sample questions to ask yourself/your organization:
 - If conducting virtual meetings, are you using available closed captioning and/or live transcription functions?
 - Are you recording your meetings or sending detailed minutes after the meeting?
 - If you provide a Zoom link for a “hybrid” meeting, do you have strategies to engage people online as well as people in person?
3. **Equity:** Are you incorporating the inclusion of disabled people within other operational factors?
Sample questions to ask yourself/your organization:
 - Do disabled staff have equal access to benefits and promotion opportunities as their non-disabled counterparts?
 - Are you taking into account the voices and needs of staff with disabilities when making decisions about policies or protocols? For example, do you offer remote work models, flexible work schedules, or other accommodations for those who need them?

Recommendations

1. **Implement program requirements and checkpoints:** Programs, materials, and operations must follow standards to improve and ensure consistent accessibility. This can include training and other professional development based on inclusion and disability rights.
2. **Incorporate a disability lens to policies and programs:** NGOs should work to ensure that the broader set of stakeholders, partners, and donors incorporate a disability component or lens to proposals and program designs.
 - a. Donors could be encouraged to ensure that any Request for Application/Proposal (RFA/P) includes and is scored on a disability component illustrating how people with disabilities will be involved in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the program.
 - b. Donors should also request that grantees report on disaggregated statistics regarding inclusion of people with disabilities in their program results. Donors should expect and accept additional budget lines for inclusion and accommodation resources.
3. **Prioritize disability into budgeting:** NGOs should allocate a dedicated portion of their budget to go directly to both programmatic and administrative disability-related accommodations.