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Water Justice, Gender and Disability



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Editorial: Knowing where everyone is...

Alan Nicol, Sylvie Cordier and Floriane Clement

Development interventions typically emerge and are implemented in silos. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are a good example of this. However, as the global community shifts to implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (a far more participatory process), the *Leave No One Behind* paradigm has emerged and become a strong theme. Highlighting the inequalities faced by different – and often the hardest to reach – population groups this approach recognises the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination related to gender, age, ethnicity, religion, caste, disability and geography.

This presents an opportunity to take issues affecting the most marginalized within development into the mainstream and to drive real change, pushing for the voices, resources and support that these groups need and ensuring paper commitments become real actions. In particular, the sub-category of women and persons with disabilities – including girl children – often 'drop off' the design, development and delivery of key service provision, the results of which leave them unable to access such services and having to scratch together other ways of meeting their needs, sometimes at great personal risk and cost.

Now the SDGs have begun implementation it is time to put the targets and indicators to use, ensuring that this includes the 'left out' groups and in the process strengthening their own agency to effect change in their lives. As editors of this volume on gender, disability and WASH, we argue that a critical starting point lies in the achievement of SDG Goal 1 on poverty, Goal 5 on gender equality, and Goal 6 on universal access to water and sanitation. These can and should be connected to Goal 10 on reducing inequalities, within which is the challenge of supporting more inclusive development involving the specific needs of persons with disabilities.

Important legally-binding United Nations Conventions on Human Rights exist to support this, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006). Under these instruments governments are obliged to report on measures and policies they have adopted to

eliminate discrimination. Yet, whilst undoubtedly important documents in their own right, they are but a necessary and not sufficient condition to effect real change that improves the quality of people's lives.

The papers in this volume on gender, persons with disabilities and WASH in South Asia help to illustrate why and provide important pointers on ways forward. A common thread throughout the four articles is that a constellation of challenges still exists, from 'exclusion' through prejudice at different levels, to institutional realities that render policy and other instruments ineffective in practice. In some cases, even, there remains a complete absence of key legal and policy instruments.

In Nepal, Hoffman, Yakami and Dhakal note the lack of practical implementation of international conventions and the persistence of exclusion, often based on deep-seated prejudices within local communities. They argue that governments and other development agents in effect systematically neglect these most vulnerable groups which allows for the persistence of discrimination. Far more needs to be done to breach resulting social and institutional exclusion, including providing information and knowledge, and tailoring physical structures to the needs of these groups. In Sri Lanka (Jaffna), Hanley et al reflect on the complexity of exclusion, but also the very real possibilities that exist to improve inclusion. These include more explicit acknowledgement by government of the difficulties persons with disabilities face in accessing WASH facilities and, for implementers, turning more comprehensive understanding into more early consultation, planning and design with these specific groups involved.

Buisson, Curnow and Naz, in examining Bangladesh stress the importance of power dynamics. They argue for a more targeted approach that not simply seeks inclusivity but moves to the establishment of more specialised institutions, including creating female-only water management sub-committees. Finally, in India, Mekala similarly notes how institutions – as well as development actors – are key to change. Institutions that are tailored to persons with disabilities and particularly those that intersect

gender and disability are critical, including providing mentoring and training to support real capacity development with an emphasis on strengthening agency. What is common here is the need for institutional and policy set-up to recognize the need for less general and more specialised and tailored change. This is also the story of Utthan and of her director, Nafisa Barot. As Ahmed highlights, effective and inclusive interventions start with on-the ground knowledge that not only addresses water scarcity issues but also challenges entrenched inequalities in social and economic structures, above all those rooted in patriarchal and feudal systems. Complacency and acceptance that business as usual is working will not deliver decency and human dignity in the face of resistance and continued social and institutional barriers.

Where to go next? The answer appears two-pronged: to enforce what exists already through the use of international legal instruments, but avoiding complacency in the face of 'general attempts at inclusion'; whilst using more targeted, directed and tailored activism that can seek more specific change as part of the drive to achieve the SDGs. In what is still a very patriarchal world this specific action should actually demonstrate (and not just promote) practical change, starting with effectively listening to and engaging key groups, and combining this with monitoring and indicator frameworks that can demonstrate progress and the achievement of results for these groups. Whilst the SDGs are a crucial starting point, the editors of this volume call on all involved to ensure that disaggregation of data on gender and persons with disabilities is mainstreamed across all goal monitoring so that the *Leave No-one Behind* paradigm starts with *knowing where everyone is*.

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