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Disability and Poverty : a Global Challenge

ARNE H. EIDE AND BENEDICTE INGSTAD
The Policy Press, UK, (ISBN 9781847428851), Hard-
back, 256 p.

Book Review by Majid Turmusani, Ph.D.

Recension de livre • Book Review

This account examines a recurring theme in disability discourse concerning people with disabilities (PWDS) living in hardship and efforts deployed by development cooperation aimed at fighting poverty or what is being termed recently as “disability inclusive development”, highlighted in article 32 of Convention on the rights of people with disabilities (CRPD). The book argues that disability and poverty are interwoven and interconnected by structural and political process that creates and perpetuates disability, poverty and social exclusion and calls for dismantling barriers and enhancing access to service provision for breaking this vicious cycle.

Disability and Poverty: A Global Challenge is an edited collection authored by experienced academics, researchers and professionals working on disability and development issues. It looks at a spectrum of perspectives documenting the lived experiences of PWDS between ideals and grim realities of poverty and social exclusion. The various chapters of this book cover important events in the life cycle of the disabled individual, their families and community at large; debating the ongoing shift in perceptions and culture besides policies and programs dealing with disability issues. A major observation noted in this analysis is the continued barriers faced by PWDS in the developing world, especially at times of economic crisis, conflict or emergency situation. Such reality however is being overcome by stories of survival, resilience and success. The book ends by presenting some important policy pointers for future action, noting the role of structural

and political phenomena in explaining and breaking the poverty-disability cycle and calls for a greater role of PWDS in such process.

The book is divided into eleven chapters with an introduction and concluding epilogue all of which covering the following four themes: inclusion of PWDS in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP); notable changes in national disability policies; poverty in conflict situations and a cross-cutting theme on widespread neglect, barriers and discrimination. The book begins with an excellent introduction on disability and poverty within international perspective underlining current disability politics (concepts, definitions and models), global policies (i.e. Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and CRPD) and practices; their ideals, shortfalls and aspirations. The introduction raises an ethical question concerning the lost opportunity for participation on the part of those labelled “disabled poor” and calls for opportunities for empowering this population through upheld rights, capacity building and research activities such as disability-poverty monitoring research.

The first theme on mainstreaming disability into development work through PRSP is well represented in the analysis of Wazakili and others in chapter one dealing with social inclusion and poverty reduction in Malawi and Uganda where they rewrite innovatively and briefly MDG’s eight goals with reference to PWDS highlighting their role in PRSP process and outcomes. Such timely vision however is contrasted by a harsh living conditions of the majority of PWDS in developing countries as being articulated by

Eide and colleagues in chapter three as well as by Grut and others in their analysis on disability and barriers in Kenya in the context of poverty in chapter eight. Similarly, this discussion is seen in chapter nine by Muderedzi and Ingstad on disability and social suffering hinting to an increasingly emerging issue: food security and food politics in times of poverty. This analysis could be enriched by a comparative debate on the “relative concept of poverty” outside of the developing world (i.e. in transitional and emerging economies) noting a new face of poverty which is emerging in these societies and to some extent in the developed world – one that is linked to food prices and food politics. For example, despite little evidence, an increasing debate is linking the sharp rise in food prices in North America to health problems such as certain types of obesity caused by high consumption of cheap junk food.

The theme on current changes in policies and perspectives is debated in chapter two on China by Fjeld and Sagli focusing on the link between poverty and disability within the context of health care/er, highlighting important reforms and progressive policies and practices dealing with PWDs. Such reforms are inseparable from the global campaign for change in doing disability business which has culminated in an international instrument (Convention on the rights of people with disabilities, CRPD) coming into force in 2008. In the same spirit, this theme is also discussed by Braathen and Loeb in their analysis of barriers to education of PWDs in chapter four in Malawi and the resulting link between lack of education and poverty and social exclusion, notably for those with albinism, disabled girls and rural disabled. Equally, this theme is debated in “disability grants” in South Africa by Hansen and Sait in chapter five. It is interesting to note that the South African experience of struggle against inequality has resulted in an early enlightened disability movement and an empowered community. This greatly influenced policy and programs targeting PWDs including safety nets of disability grants. Such analysis could benefit from the work of Vic Finkelstein (2005) on the contemporary history of disability movement in South Africa – *Reflections on the social model of dis-*

ability: the South African connection, Leeds: Leeds University as well as from the recently released comprehensive collection of WHO/World Bank (2011) *World Report on Disability*, Geneva.

The theme on poverty and conflict is discussed in chapter six on displacement and mobility of PWDs in northern Uganda by Muyindra and Whyte; chapter ten on landmines in Cambodia by Taksdal and chapter eleven on poverty as trauma by Husum and Edvardsen. Throughout these chapters, the individual and collective experience of PWDs surfaces clearly within the context of war, political conflict and situation of emergency and displacement. Together, they emphasise the fundamental need of PWDs including “war disabled” for a safe livelihood with special provision to be made □ in times of emergency and transitional periods □ for essential services such as mobility devices, rehabilitation (including psychosocial services for trauma sufferers), education, access to credit and employment among others. Such understanding of needs vs. rights is crucial to the inclusion of PWDs and perhaps future research could look into this issue in more depth according to CRPD framework.

Finally, the book provides some cultural insights on traditional concepts and beliefs towards disability in a number of societies, namely Yemen and South Africa. Examples are shown in restricted access to services by those suffering from epilepsy in South Africa as well as cases of segregation of disabled women in Yemen to name but a few. Various chapters highlight the role of corporate responsibility in changing attitudes, policy and practices dealing with PWDs with leading role given to Disabled People’s Organizations (DPOs), families and other community groups.

In brief, this book includes important analysis on disability and poverty, highlighting a challenging reality, growing needs on the grounds and demonstrating an opportunity for bridging the gap and breaking the cycle of poverty among PWDs. The analysis draws on powerful first hands accounts of PWDs themselves reporting their own suffering and triumph as well



as on secondary data, surveys and other types of empirical datasets. It also includes substantial theoretical analysis on the subject, notably in the introduction and chapter one using scarce but standard texts in the field such as: Yeo and Moore (2003) on “including disabled people in poverty reduction work” and Elwan (1999) “poverty and disability: a survey of the literature”, UN documents among others. Although the chapters differed greatly, contributions have successfully debated the core focus of this book “being disabled and poor” providing cross-cultural quality analysis that fills a gap in the emerging study of disability and development. In addition to scholars, this collection can be useful for community development workers and planners involved in development cooperation.

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