

# Achieving disability inclusive employment – Are the current approaches deep enough?

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## Abstract

Diverse approaches to promoting disability inclusive employment aim to transform workplaces into truly inclusive environments, usually with intervention strategies targeting two main groups: employers and jobseekers with disabilities. However, they do not always consider other relevant stakeholders or address the relationships and interactions between diverse actors in the wider social ecosystem. These approaches often neglect deeper ‘vexing’ difficulties which block progress towards disability inclusive work environments. Most interventions rightly embrace hegemonic ‘social models of disability’ and use human rights arguments but may neglect entrenched structural factors. Disability inclusive employment is complex, with unaddressed invisible aspects that continue to limit progress. We explore some key relevant disability concepts and then interrogate evidence from the ‘Inclusion Works’ programme working in four middle- and low-income countries, considering some intractable barriers underlying the slow movement towards inclusive employment. Finally, we propose that a more participatory action orientated approach involving disabled people and others is needed to both generate deeper understanding and provide pathways towards new solutions to obstinate problems through progressive action learning processes in context. Programmatic interventions that work

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across the levels of the ecosystem and address power relations and interactions between stakeholders could lead to more substantial forms of disability inclusive employment.

#### KEYWORDS

ableism, disability inclusive employment, disabled jobseekers, employers, inclusion, social ecosystem, structural violence

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) both endorse the rights of people with disabilities to equal access to decent work (UN, 2006; UN, 2022). However, despite the ambition and rhetoric, meaningful employment for persons with disabilities<sup>1</sup> remains a vexing and obstinate problem globally (Mitra, 2014). This paper critically explores why disability inclusive employment in low- and middle-income countries remains largely unachieved and how progress could be accelerated with alternative strategies.

By 'disability inclusive employment', we mean recruitment and workplace policies and practices which welcome and enable disabled people as applicants and employees and provide them with the same opportunities as others to secure 'decent' work (ILO, 2015) matching their aspirations and skills. The concept of inclusive employment assumes that people will be employed in 'mainstream' workplaces, not separate or segregated settings, which are contrary to the UNCRPD (Article 27 and others). Welcoming people with impairments into mainstream workplaces may necessitate adapting the environment (physical, communication and attitudinal) to enable people to work effectively and comfortably.

Many disabled people want to work but face numerous barriers to securing a job, staying employed and building a career. Key blockages to disability inclusive employment include entrenched negative assumptions about disabled people's entitlement and suitability to work. This means that those who do successfully navigate exclusionary recruitment processes often continue to feel undervalued and stigmatised in their workplaces (Heymann et al., 2014). Current approaches to cultivating disability inclusive employment often fail to generate transformative impacts, arguably because they neglect the subjective, relational and dynamic aspects that maintain unequal power dynamics and so perpetuate workplace exclusion. These issues are compounded by inadequate knowledge, with employers often perceiving disability inclusion as difficult, a threat to profits or a purely charitable endeavour fulfilling their company's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) commitments (Ebuenyi et al., 2020; Mueke, 2014; Wickenden et al., 2020). There may be tokenistic interventions at individual, organisational and broader socio-economic and political levels, especially in contexts of poverty (Banks et al., 2017; Grech, 2009). These actions often focus on 'easy wins' through 'tick-box' employment of highly or overqualified (for the role) disabled people in visible roles, while those from more marginalised or stigmatised impairment groups that employers see as more challenging are overlooked. This is not real systemic change that realises people with disabilities claimable rights to 'decent' work (OHCHR, 2020). Overall, the 'wicked'<sup>2</sup> issue of disability inclusive employment is proving difficult to address through top-down policy-led strategies with linear, simplistic intervention logics (Wickenden et al., 2020).

This paper draws on data from Inclusion Works (IW), a 4-year UK aid funded programme which explored how people with disabilities can successfully access and secure formal waged employment. We draw on interim data

<sup>1</sup>We are aware of the sensitivities and controversy about language around disability, in particular between the 'person first' language (e.g. person with disabilities and so on) used by many globally and 'disabled people' preferred in the UK and some other contexts because this aligns more closely with the ethos of the social model of disabilities. We will use the two versions interchangeably in this paper.

<sup>2</sup>A 'wicked' social issue is one that is intransigent and extremely hard to solve because it involves complex interconnections between diverse contributing aspects of the problem, a range of differently positioned stakeholders and contradictory views or limited knowledge on practical solutions (Conklin, 2005)

generated during this programme, including the perspectives of disabled jobseekers, employers and representatives of organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs) as important intermediaries. These data were generated during activities undertaken as part of IW in Bangladesh, Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda, including labour market assessments, focus group discussions, Action Learning Groups (ALGs), key informant interviews and other adaptive learning processes in the project.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, we argue that a re-orientation of policy and practice is needed in recognition of recent developments in disability and inclusion theory, sociopolitical and business understanding and intervention approaches. In the first section, we ground the paper in key concepts relevant to disability inclusive employment endeavours. After this, we provide evidence of the kinds of deeper knowledge on attitudinal, emotional and power dynamic aspects that must be considered to build genuinely inclusive employment strategies and the gaps in tackling them that we identified in the IW programme. In the discussion, we interrogate the assumptions underlying common intervention approaches through the example of IW, which may perpetuate rather than solve the challenges in development programmes aiming for disability inclusive employment.

Our analysis shows that 'shallow' interventions only address surface-level barriers, and this leads to short term and superficial forms of inclusion. The constraints of the somewhat siloed IW programmatic approach and the Covid-19 pandemic circumstances meant that we were unable to put our proposals for a more holistic, linked up model into practice in this programme. However, we draw on our prior experiences of alternative intervention models that could succeed, working with and between stakeholders across the disability ecosystem in context, to learn progressively how to address the structural and invisible barriers at the root of the obstinate problems of disability inclusive employment.

## 2 | CONCEPTUALLY GROUNDING DISABILITY INCLUSIVE EMPLOYMENT

In order to ground our paper, this section discusses key relevant disability theories (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2006), the impacts of structural violence, persisting unhelpful beliefs and attitudes and different intervention approaches on efforts to build disability inclusive employment across disability ecosystems in practice.

### 2.1 | The structural violence of ableism as a barrier to disability inclusive employment

Following decades of transnationally implemented neoliberal policy reforms, most middle-and low-income countries now have liberal market economies, deeply integrated into global markets, (Carroll, 2012; Selwyn, 2017). However, capitalism tends to generate social fragmentation (Habermas, 1984). Market economies are premised on individualism and competition, which perpetuates social divisions between those perceived more or less adept, while structurally hindering collaborative work that could bring many people more genuine work satisfaction (Douthwaite, 1996). Shifting this radically in contexts where market forces exert strong pressure, and the 'bottom-line' rules, is challenging. Many low-income countries' labour markets are fiercely competitive, providing only very small numbers of formal, legally protected jobs (Sumberg et al., 2020).

In these contexts, most employers are fundamentally looking for people who will be 'easy' to employ and instantly productive; meaning they are often unable to perceive workplace advantages in investing in someone who might need adaptations or support. This is intensified by underlying institutionalised ableism, which disadvantages people with disabilities, compared with nondisabled people who conform to normative expectations about who should be at work and what they can do (Goodley, 2014). These assumptions lead to habitual recruitment of people who have a similar identity to the majority and unconscious bias against disabled people during recruitment and in personal and organisational work relations. In materialist environments, perceptions of physical prowess, cleverness,

<sup>3</sup>Many of these IW resources are published on Source and available here: <https://asksource.info/inclusive-futures/search>

speed of work, complex and subtle communication (where much is left unsaid) are prioritised over difference and diversity (Fine, 2019). Disabled people are often deemed to fall short and often report they feel they must be better than others in order to counteract an implicit 'negative balance sheet' (Reeve, 2004). Indeed, some employers also assume a damaging effect on their company's image if they recruit disabled people.

Various actors, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and Global Business Disability Network (GBDN), are active globally in promoting a positive business case for disability inclusion. However, business leaders and management scholars have long identified that enacting the 'business case for diversity' in outward-facing activities, for instance, matching employees to the demographics of client populations, can have the 'perverse' effect of generating 'diversity without inclusion' (Bendick et al., 2010, p.481). A political difficulty is that the disability rights movement's counter-hegemonic focus on equal rights and valuing people in different ways, and not necessarily for their productive potential, can appear contrary to business incentives. An assumed baseline of necessary functional skills that employers seek may exclude some, particularly those with intellectual, communication and psychosocial difficulties. In such ways, ableism is arguably embedded in market processes and this discrimination and neglect is a manifestation of systemic structural violence (Farmer, 2004; Galtung, 1969).

Other forms of violence (e.g. physical, sexual and psychological) are increasingly acknowledged as high risks for disabled people and particularly for women with disabilities. However, somewhat surprisingly, the idea of conceptualising disabled people's disadvantaged position as structural violence has not been widely proposed to date (Grech, 2009; Neille & Penn, 2017, Snyder & Mitchel, 2010). However, structurally violent systems are insidiously discriminatory because their impacts normalised. The neglect of disabled people as a large minority population perpetuates power gradients between nondisabled and disabled people and also, though less recognised, between people with different impairments (e.g. physical vs. cognitive difficulties). These intractable and underrecognised unequal power dynamics underpin structural violence towards disabled people. This is largely invisible to nondisabled people while felt strongly by those who experience it.

## 2.2 | The challenges of addressing unequal power dynamics and normalised negative attitudes across disability employment ecosystems

In the last few decades, driven by understanding that disability is a subjective, socially constructed concept, which varies with context and culture, and its relationship with impairment (its objective, biological counterpart), many societies have undergone encouraging changes in beliefs and attitudes towards people who are perceived as different (Shakespeare, 2006). Arising out of this shift, the ground-breaking UN treaty, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD) (UN, 2006), underlines the pre-existing rights that disabled people have. This document can assist governments to interrogate their laws and practices more carefully and intentionally in order to be disability inclusive across sectors (UN, 2007). However, attitude changes thus far have not been enough to realise inclusion in the utopian sense that is envisioned by the UNCRPD and by the disability movement led by OPDs nationally and internationally. For real change to happen, more ambitious interventions are still needed to shift attitudes towards an understanding of disabled people as being more the same as others than they are different.

People with disabilities are often regarded with ambiguity, fear, suspicion and lack of understanding, in a similar way to other marginalised minority groups who have indeterminate or 'liminal' status (Turner, 1967). For youth or homeless people, for instance, liminality is temporary, but for disabled people, it can be permanent. Traditionally, people with disabilities have been excluded from mainstream life and are invisible to most people or automatically treated as outsiders. Thus, other citizens may not meet them, or study, work or socialise alongside them, let alone employ them. This does not necessarily mean that others are inherently discriminatory, but the lack of inclusive practices could be explained by a lack of experience or knowledge, not necessarily deliberate discrimination (ILO, 2015,

Bruyere et al., 2011). One antidote to this is 'contact theory' as developed from Allport's (1954) early work—the idea that direct contact and meaningful engagement with someone very different can change people's attitudes. Direct

(e.g. meeting someone) and indirect contact (e.g. exposure to a film) can be powerful in promoting understanding and changed behaviour (Barr & Bracchitta, 2015; Rohwerder, 2019; Walker & Scior, 2013; Werner & Scior, 2016).

International and country-based non-governmental organisation (INGO/NGO) programmes are increasingly aligned with national aid and development agendas which are influenced by market-led policy (Carroll & Jarvis, 2015). Projects are typically set up through collaboration between NGOs of various sizes and governments. Disability focussed programmes increasingly emphasise engagement with OPDs (at local, national or international levels) and the involvement of OPD leaders in programming. This is of course a democratising ideal in line with contact theory. However, this highlights the need to attend to power dynamics not only between disabled and non-disabled people but within and between OPDs.

Economic inequalities, as well as intersecting aspects such as gender, are intrinsically entangled with the limiting dynamics of structural violence. For example, a disabled person with a high-status job may experience fewer constraints, and this is more likely if they have been supported by a rich, well-educated family and have been educated themselves. This enables them to contradict stereotypes about disabled people's powerlessness and raise awareness of disabled people's potential. Nevertheless, the success of these more privileged people is unlikely to translate into opportunities for less well-positioned disabled people, who have less 'power-within' (self-belief and confidence) and less agency (or 'power-to') (see Gaventa, 2006 for terminology). Disabled people with less social capital are likely to need more support, and this may be underestimated due to the simplistic notion that, if some disabled people have 'made it', others can too. Additionally, there is often a gendered aspect to OPD membership and leadership, with men usually outnumbering women especially in key roles. This is an example of power imbalances playing out in everyday interactions within a social ecosystem; and collective movements, including those driven by disabled people, may perpetuate marginalisation, if insufficient practical attention is paid to challenging and addressing intersectional differences (Howard et al., 2018).

This also means that those who become involved in OPDs are often the disability elite. In this way inequalities in a wider social ecosystem may be merely replicated within, with the vast majority of disabled people (whether members of the participating OPDs or not) remaining excluded and disadvantaged. Thus, the positive impacts claimed for programme interventions may go to the already advantaged. This looks worryingly like a classic case of elite capture within the disability arena (Myers, 2016). The disability movement (at global and national levels in many countries) has achieved an impressive amount, pushing change in attitudes and practice, but it remains resistant to criticism and any attempt to do so is often disallowed and silenced. However, attitude change is not tackled with enough nuance or depth in interventions or even at all in the different levels of the stakeholder nexus.

The concept of the social ecosystem is highly relevant to understanding and addressing systemic issues in the disability inclusion arena, as it provides a lens to interrogate the relative success of different programmatic approaches targeting different levels and to spot gaps. Large interventions like IW assume that if INGOs and local partners collaborate and work with all stakeholders in a social ecosystem, this will be effective. However, unless interventions working on disability inclusive employment address negative attitudes and the entrenched and more tacit power dynamics 'in-between' stakeholders disability inclusion is unlikely to be achieved. Moreover, we propose that tackling this requires learning how to shift attitudes and relational dynamics through long-term interactive processes across a social ecosystem over time.

### 3 | EVIDENCE FROM DIVERSE ACTORS INVOLVED IN THE IW

The main aim of the IW programme was explicitly to test innovative ways to improve economic empowerment and inclusion for people with disabilities, enabling them to find employment and earn a living. Funded by UK aid and led by the INGO Sightsavers, the programme ran between 2018 and 2022 and was delivered by a consortium of partners. It focused on the countries of Uganda, Kenya, Bangladesh and Nigeria and predominantly on 'formal' employment, although the definition of this was expanded during the programme.

Having explored relevant key concepts and models, we now discuss interim evidence generated during the IW programme from jobseekers with disabilities, employers and OPD members involved in the programme.

### 3.1 | Methodology

The data we draw on come from several programme evidence-generating activities, principally ALGs and also learning events, reports and labour market assessments (LMAs). Our research activities were reviewed and approved by the IDS ethics review board (ethics approval no. PT/17006), and we also obtained in-country ethics approval via our in-country partners where needed. Our ethical risk mitigation strategies included adapting participant information sheets and consent formats and processes according to impairment-related access needs and confidential handling and storage of data. There was also, for example, discussion of choice, anonymity/confidentiality, how to withdraw for the project, which was adapted for participants' different communication modes and needs. Local researchers were trained in supporting the uncoerced choices of unconfident participants and in how to identify if participants were unduly stressed by topics and needed to withdraw. Inclusive safeguarding processes were put into place, and consent to participate was approached as ongoing and revisited at regular intervals as activities evolved.

The methodologies for these activities are summarised below.

#### 3.1.1 | ALG

Action learning (or action research) processes involve researchers working with participants to create knowledge about a topic or problem that directly affects them. As explained by Bradbury (2010, p.93). 'Unlike conventional social science, its purpose is not primarily or solely to understand social arrangements, but also to effect desired change as a path to generating knowledge and empowering stakeholders'. As such, action research considers participants to be experts in their own experiences and builds knowledge collaboratively with them on the underlying constraints to improvement and how these could be addressed. This in turn can inform and drive learning 'in action' as participant's solution ideas are put into practice.

ALGs are meetings generally guided by a facilitator, which are held regularly over time with a consistent membership. The members are similar to each other in some respect (e.g. in their work role, identities and life situation), and they set the agenda for discussion in each meeting. Classically, they may also make plans for actions to be taken outside the meetings, to solve a problem or to further an interest or concern they have. They then discuss these actions, including what worked and did not, at subsequent meetings. ALGs can also catalyse further extended activities by the members beyond the life of facilitated project meetings.

The ALGs in the IW programme were facilitated by local researchers in all four countries over approximately a 1-year period until March 2022. There were three groups in each country, two for jobseekers with disabilities enrolled in the programme (women or youth or mixed groups) and one for employers. The exception was Nigeria where there was no employers group, due to a lack of interest from employers.

The jobseeker participants were recruited through our INGO consortium partners who were running the programme's main intervention activities. We asked these partners to purposively select and invite 8–10 individuals per group, bearing in mind gender balance (apart from the women's groups), type of impairment and involvement in the programme. Most jobseekers were involved in one or more programme activity, such as online or face-to-face skills development trainings or having a mentor advising them. Over the course of their ALG meetings, with guidance from the trained facilitators, the groups undertook a series of participatory activities to explore pathways to disability inclusive employment, based on their experience and perspectives on the barriers to and enablers of access to work.

Invitations to participate in the employers' ALG were sent by the INGO partners to individuals (usually at senior level or Human Resources managers) whose companies were participating in some aspect of the IW programme, for

instance, through staff having received some training on disability inclusion or being involved in creating workplace placements or internships.

As typical in ALGs group members set priorities for discussion and decided what was most important to tackle. The data generated by these ALGs were thematically analysed within and between countries during online process led by the UK research team in collaboration with the researchers in the four countries. Key aspects were identified from the written reports of the ALG meetings and discussed extensively to produce common themes, as well as contrasts between group types and across countries. Quotes were identified from the data to illustrate the themes. An overview of the emergent themes was presented back to all the groups in their final meeting, for their member checking, analysis validation and additional commentary.

### 3.1.2 | LMAs

The LMAs were conducted in the four countries and followed FHI 360's LMA framework.<sup>4</sup> They adopted a Markets for Poor (M4P) approach (now sometimes known as a Market Systems Development approach). This involves aiming to transform systems around the poor by stimulating growth and expanding access, in an effort to improve their lives (Springfield Centre, 2014). The purpose of the LMAs was to map demand for and supply of labour, supporting functions and regulatory frameworks for each country through analysis of key documentation. In addition, the LMAs included the perspectives of jobseekers, employers and OPDs in the analysis. These perspectives were gathered through interviews and questionnaires. Participants were purposefully selected to obtain perspectives relevant to improving the inclusivity of labour markets, with triangulation achieved through including different stakeholders. For the current paper, the data from employers were analysed to supplement the employer ALG evidence. This included the responses of nine employers in Bangladesh, five employers in both Uganda and Nigeria and four employers in Kenya.

### 3.1.3 | Learning reviews

As part of an adaptive learning strategy of the IW programme, learning reviews about different programme aspects were held in each country and with all the countries together. These provided the opportunity for various stakeholders to discuss experiences and share key learnings. Participants in these reviews included a wide range types of people including in addition to jobseekers, employers, OPD partners and programme staff, some representatives of Business disability networks, government officials from relevant ministries and Human Resources professionals' organisations. Due to Covid-19 related restrictions, these events were largely held online. They followed a participatory design, providing space for discussion among peers who had similar roles and also between different stakeholders and countries. Intentional facilitation techniques were employed to overcome power dynamics and allow for open and frank discussion. To validate the data and ensure the quality and reliability of findings, drafts of the reports generated from the learning reviews were circulated to participants for comment and further input.

### 3.1.4 | Programme reports

In addition to the evidence-generating activities detailed above, data were gathered from IW programme reports and surveys of specific groups of stakeholders (e.g., OPD partner survey,). While these documents were produced

<sup>4</sup>For key approaches to FHI 360's labour market assessment sees: [https://www.edu-links.org/sites/default/files/media/file/Key\\_Approaches\\_to\\_Labor\\_Market\\_Assessment\\_-\\_Executive\\_Summary\\_0.pdf](https://www.edu-links.org/sites/default/files/media/file/Key_Approaches_to_Labor_Market_Assessment_-_Executive_Summary_0.pdf)



primarily to document progress and learnings from the programme, rather than as a research exercise per se, they did contain useful additional information which is relevant to gaining a nuanced understanding of disability inclusive employment.

## 4 | KEY FINDINGS FROM THE DATA

### 4.1 | Disabled jobseekers' experiences and perspectives

As anticipated, IW jobseekers' often reported that they had previously faced employment challenges including negative attitudes, poor physical and or communication access and difficulties with resourcing reasonable accommodation. Absence of communication support such as sign language interpreters for those who are hearing impaired or tactile interpreters for deaf-blind jobseekers, resulted in, for example:

*'a drop out of potential candidates with disabilities'* (Jobseeker, LMA, Bangladesh).<sup>5</sup>

or

*'being left out due to the inability of the bosses to meet the costs of my accommodational requirements'* (Uganda, Jobseekers 4).

There were also predictable access adaptations lacking, such as workplace ramps, accessible toilets, IT equipment/software (e.g. screen readers for those who are visually impaired) and accessible information and job application sites (Jobseeker, LMA Nigeria). One participant said that there are some factories in their locality where people with speech and hearing impairments

*'can do packaging work where no communication is needed. But most of the people do not have that information'*. (Bangladesh, Women Jobseekers 3).

While access to information is important, this quote also demonstrates a lack of understanding about what is meant by inclusive employment. If a particular type of job is deemed suitable for a certain group of people due to their impairment, this reduces choice and opportunities, whereas jobs should be adapted and adjusted so that people who have the requisite qualification and happen to have various characteristics can do them with appropriate support. The assumption that someone doing packaging does not need to communicate could also be challenged. Arguably, every type of job involves some forms of communication, and all people can communicate even if via a nonspeech mode such as sign language.

One respondent with a physical impairment described how hard it can be to move around without a wheelchair, which might necessitate crawling (Jobseeker, LMA Uganda 3), with another emphasising how humiliating this is. The emotional component of this degrading experience is often not underlined, with people being expected to tolerate a range of negative treatment in return for a job. Some disabled people have experienced this kind of treatment so regularly that they no longer see it as unacceptable and internalise and do not challenge the oppression.

<sup>5</sup>The identifiers in brackets accompanying quotes refer to the source of the data. Thus, it is from one of the four countries Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria or Bangladesh and from a type of data source (e.g. one of a series of action learning groups (number in the series), either with jobseekers or employers, or from another event/or output such as a learning review, situational analysis, key informant interview or labour market analysis).



From a 'social model' perspective, the lack of adaptations to the workplace environment are the barriers, not someone's impairment, but that is not how it necessarily feels to individuals:

*'You do not want to be an inconvenience ...Most times you voluntarily chose to stay back out of the fear of inconveniencing others. An impairment impedes yourself.* (Jobseeker, LMA, Uganda).

Negative attitudes and behaviours from employers, colleagues, family and the wider communities were mentioned more than any other aspect, at every stage, from job search to being in employment. Several respondents said that their impairment was the greatest barrier to meaningful work:

*'Society first sees the disability and never see me as a skilled person ... I can do 98% of what they do but employers do not know this because they never give me a chance to prove myself'* (Jobseeker, LMA, Uganda).

Many of the IW jobseekers are highly qualified, with university honours and master's degrees. Their experiences suggest that educational achievement is not enough to secure 'decent' work, which calls into question a programmatic focus on more training, particularly in economies that have many more jobseekers than available jobs (cf. Fox et al., 2020, pp. 5–7). Even after successfully navigating the application process and interview, they reported facing prejudice:

*'I went for an interview ....but I don't know what happened. They never came back to me. They asked me .... How will you manage? I believe they were judging .... my disability'*.

Respondents perceived that they are not offered jobs appropriate to their skills due to assumptions about their capacity:

*'People say if we give this one a job, she will not do the job we want. Yet you have the capacity to do it'* (Jobseeker, LMA, Uganda).

There was a sense that disabled jobseekers must 'take what they can get', rather than something that aligns with their passions and interests (ALG facilitator meeting). Work then becomes about survival and taking any job, rather than a decent job and fulfilling one's potential. If they do gain employment, people report not usually being promoted to decision making positions, despite being capable. Jobseekers also reported discrimination from colleagues once in post:

*'even workmates undermine us and think we can't perform'* (Jobseekers, LMA, Uganda).

Some discrimination in the workplace environment is distinctly gendered. Women and girls face more severe neglect, derogatory language, and gender-based abuse.

*'We girls face a lot of sexual abuse and harassment from men ... .. men think that we can't do anything'* (Jobseekers, LMA, Uganda).

*'Women with intellectual disability are more prone to sexual abuse and rape in the workplace'* (Mixed LMA group, Nigeria).

There were also reports in the data of women feeling coerced or bullied into unwanted sexual encounters in return for employment.

As well as neglect and abuse, people face risk of economic exploitation when in work, with several respondents reporting having to work longer hours for less money than colleagues without impairments. Disabled employees often find themselves with a choice of putting up with this or leaving.

*'Persons with disabilities cannot bargain for their working rights. If they .... protest, the risks for losing the job become higher'* (Jobseeker, LMA, Bangladesh).

Having to disprove negative expectations means having to be better than others. Not complaining becomes a 'self-marketing' point:

*'they actually preferred me to the others who had no disabilities because of my commitment and dedication to my job. The others used to leave earlier but me, I could hang on up to late'* (Jobseekers, LMA, Uganda).

The fear of being seen as a burden motivates jobseekers to prove themselves, by complying with unfair demands, and increased the pressure not to make mistakes. Competing on the basis of individualised market-based valuation logics in an ableist and neoliberal context, there is less room for difference, diversity and human imperfection.

IW jobseekers' experiences thus point to the structural violence and inequality in systems where opportunities are only open to the most educated and privileged disabled jobseekers from less stigmatised impairment groups—those perceived to be 'easier' to include. Jobseekers talked about being undermined, disrespected, isolated, mistreated and gossiped about, which was experienced as hostile and stigmatising. For example, two jobseekers said they were addressed by colleagues by their impairment (e.g. 'deaf' or 'wheelchair') rather than their names. Someone with Albinism was named 'white man'. This is dehumanising and denies the person the opportunity to have an identity that is not about their impairment. Some were scared to report this, as raising these concerns would cause employers to brand *them* as having 'attitudes', which would need to change ('toughen up') rather than the behaviours of colleagues.

These kinds of experiences contribute to low jobseeker confidence, especially given wider stigmatising cultural attitudes and the already low self-esteem of some programme participants. Lack of support from family members was also commonly reported, with relatives not believing that the person could succeed in work. This resulted in mental ill-health, upset, depression, fear and anger, in some cases extreme enough to prompt people to leave employment:

*'The language used was so hurtful that I decided to quit the job'*.

*'I developed signs of depression, and all the time I was isolated and crying .... I was so mad at everything ..... The situation worsened and I had to leave the job because no one understood me'*. (Jobseekers, LMA, Uganda).

Clearly, despite all the rhetoric about the benefits ascribed to being in work, there can be serious negative consequences when environments are not truly inclusive, accepting of difference and supportive. Most of the jobseekers said that they aspired to or would prefer to be self-employed, rather than be employed, even though some had already experienced prejudice from customers, suppliers and the public. It is not clear whether this preference for entrepreneurship was a response to bad employment experiences or came from other motivations. This partly calls into question the IW programme's focus on formal employment, especially in-country contexts where such jobs make up a tiny proportion of the job market.

In terms of necessary changes, jobseekers highlighted the weak implementation of national disability and anti-discrimination legislation. People with disabilities participating in the programme placed great emphasis on raising

awareness of disability issues and inclusive practices to fundamentally change employers' understanding of the needs and aspirations of people with disabilities.

## 4.2 | Employers' perspectives

Many programmes aiming to increase the level of inclusive employment focus on working with formal employers, with a view to supporting them to adapt their work environments. Often they work with and through umbrella business organisations (e.g. the national BDN) and human resource professionals groups to develop training and tools (e.g. inclusion and workplace accessibility assessments). While these endeavours are encouraging, huge challenges to inclusion remain even in the formal sector. Some companies remain fixated on the impairment details of prospective employees, questioning their capability and capacity rather than focusing on their qualifications, competencies and potential. Demonstrating this, one IW company partner commented:

*'The biggest challenge in inclusive employment is the mobility limitations of people with disabilities'*  
(Employer, LMA, Bangladesh).

This resonates with study findings that 'employers hold stereotypical beliefs not supported by research evidence' (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2008, p.255) or 'sincere yet ill-founded views about the work-related abilities of people with disabilities' (Bonaccio et al., 2020 p.135). These attitudes conflate 'disability' with 'inability' and shut opportunities down (Gartrell, 2010). A focus on perceived limitations can be linked to outdated medical approaches to disability, where disability is regarded as an individual medical problem which the person must address themselves (e.g. get treatment for). In contrast, current approaches to disability, such as the social and rights-based models, shift the responsibility to society, including employers, to ensure fair access to all social activities, including employment (Shakespeare, 2006).

Many employers express a desire to become more inclusive but bemoan a lack of practical information regarding what they need to do. Further work is needed to understand why employers are still often unaware of social and rights-based approaches to disability and the major shifts in disability conceptualisation over the last three decades. Employers who are under pressure to be more disability inclusive often offer jobs to people with mild or moderate impairments and of particular types which are regarded as 'easier', reinforcing a hierarchy of impairment-related exclusion.

Many companies operate within a competitive environment, and as companies begin to adopt disability inclusive employment policies and approaches, their competitors may be compelled to follow suit. Some of the companies involved in IW have taken onboard perspectives about the business benefits of employing people with disabilities. As one employer commented:

*'Diversity and Inclusive [employment practices] are now recognised not as a good thing to do but a key component to make company grow. Diversity and inclusion are a lever for competitive advantage.'*  
(Employer, LMA, Nigeria).

These echoes argument from management research that 'People with disabilities comprise one of the largest underutilized labor pools' (Schur et al., 2014, p. 594) and that the quickest companies to adapt will benefit ahead of competitors. By improving disability inclusive employment practices, companies may also become more attractive to customers with disabilities.

However, inclusive practice must be meaningful and sincere, not tokenistic. Gould et al. (2022) argue that, too often, disability is included as part of a CSR strategy or philanthropic activities. This mistakenly frames disability as a characteristic that equates to an inability to work when it should be treated as an identity category. Charitable

approaches to employment are often viewed very negatively by disabled people and are contrary to the spirit of the UNCRPD.

The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in a seismic shift in the employment landscape globally. Many people with disabilities who had been employed lost their jobs or their job security (Wickenden et al., 2021). For many companies, COVID-19 interrupted initiatives to improve disability inclusive employment, as IW-linked employers reflected. They focused on core activities and staying solvent. An IW partner from a company from Bangladesh reflected that after COVID-19:

*'diversity and inclusion aspirations changed and is now less prioritized as the organization is struggling to continue its core functionalities.'* (Employer, LMA, Bangladesh).

Another partner added:

*'During the pandemic situation, the home delivery services increased. Due to mobility requirements for home delivery, people with disabilities were less prioritized in recruitment processes.'* (Employer, LMA, Bangladesh).

Again, this reveals a limited vision of who employees with disabilities might be (as only people with mobility impairments) and what roles they could play. For other companies, however, the pandemic provided time and space to reflect on their employment policy. Referring to disability inclusion, a partner commented.

*'the pandemic demonstrates to us the need to do more.'* (Employer, LMA Nigeria).

In addition, national lockdowns in response to COVID-19 resulted in many people having to work from home or more flexibly. As a partner reflected,

*'The work from home policy has helped us make our workplace more inclusive for all.'* (Employer, LMA, Nigeria).

Homeworking makes employment more accessible for some people, but it also risks sidestepping environmental and relational adaptations that need to be addressed in workplaces. It reduces the likelihood of personal contact helping overcome prejudices. Additionally, not everyone wants to work from home. For disabled people who feel isolated at home, the social aspects of going to a workplace and being accepted as part of a team are one of the anticipated and desired benefits of work outside the home.

## 4.3 | The disability inclusion ecosystem

### 4.3.1 | The role of OPDs as intermediaries and gatekeepers

Uniquely in a UN treaty, the UNCRPD (mainly articles number 4 and 33) mandates a central role for OPDs in implementing and monitoring interventions. In response, the IW programme has positioned OPDs as central relational mediators between jobseekers, employers and other stakeholders, to encourage a 'nothing about us without us' orientation and practice. This has been an innovative and unique aspect of the programme. Jobseekers on the programme confirmed not wanting to be viewed as objects of a 'charity model of disability' and appreciating OPDs' leadership as a way to feel represented appropriately.

*'People were considering people with disabilities as beggars. You could go to a shop to buy something and people instead give you money and tell you to go away thinking you are a beggar. This is humiliating and disheartening. But now organizations like NUDIPU (the national umbrella OPD), MADIPHA (a local OPD) and many other organizations have supported mindset change'. (Jobseeker, LMA, Uganda).*

In addition to providing job and soft skills training, OPDs have mentored jobseekers for interviews to increase their confidence, which OPD leaders perceived as increasing positive results. They also visited families to encourage parents to support the work aspirations of their adult children with disabilities and OPDs also supported jobseekers who secured jobs by mediating with employers:

*'we follow up regularly, visit their workplace to see whether they are facing challenges or require any reasonable accommodations support. If we found an issue, then we discuss it with the employers to help resolve it'. (OPD Bangladesh).*

OPDs have also engaged in disability sensitisation for staff to attempt to change misperceptions and prejudice and reported that employers:

*'(they) thought people with disabilities cannot work. But after recruiting them in their workforce they found ... .. they work with sincerity and dedications'. (OPD Bangladesh).*

This indicates significant contributions by OPDs beyond job training. However, bearing in mind jobseekers' experiences reported above, these claims about the ease of overcoming deep-seated prejudice appears overly optimistic. Furthermore, one OPD leader used the argument that:

*'persons with disabilities, workers are more attentive and perform well' (OPD leader, Case Study).*

As an advocacy message, this is highly problematic. The idea that all people with disabilities might have specific personality traits or behaviours reinforces stereotyping and homogenising tendencies which hinder seeing applicants as individuals with unique sets of skills and characteristics, of which their impairment is just one aspect. Another OPD leader mentioned lobbying employers and duty bearers to 'place our skilled jobseekers in employment' (OPD Leader, Case Study). However, such a focus on high qualifications and skill levels means that opportunities usually go to those who are already more privileged, often from certain impairment groups. Jobseekers noted this problem:

*As a person living with a neurological disability like autism, we are considered outsiders, and we are never put as a priority. We are put aside and it affects our mental health. (Jobseekers, LMA, Kenya).*

Trainings which necessitate pre-existing literacy and numeracy skills also exclude those who have lacked access to education. This illustrates a need for a life course approach to promoting inclusion, where disabled children's access to education is also on the agenda.

Furthermore, a programme structure that positions OPDs as gatekeepers means that the intervention is led by disability leaders who already have the most social capital among people with disabilities. If these individuals are themselves privileged in a 'hierarchy of exclusion' (i.e. are from the least excluded groups), they may not necessarily have the knowledge, understanding and experience to advocate for people lower down the hierarchy (i.e. women rather than men, people with the most excluded types of impairments, those with little education or living in poverty). They may (albeit unintentionally) focus on and argue for interventions that benefit people like them. Thus elite capture by the 'usual suspects' is a risk:

*'The capacity of OPD members was built mostly for the Chairperson, secretary and Councillors for PWD' (OPD partner survey).*

#### 4.3.2 | Building OPD capacities—Beyond the rights perspective

IW provided training for OPDs through the disability rights focused part of the programme.<sup>6</sup> Overall, there was a strong emphasis on promoting the disability rights enshrined in the UNCRPD and national laws. As a consequence, the OPDs' interaction with employers emphasised rights rhetoric but arguably without a nuanced and tailored approach. OPD leaders within the IW countries reported that training for them had helped them to be more confident in advising employers on inclusive employment issues, engaging with local/regional/national government on legislation and bridging the communication gap between private sector employers and the disability movement. However, the training provided by the global OPD to local OPDs was focused on compliance to the UNCRPD at a high level. As a result, practical (and sometimes impairment or context specific) guidance on being inclusive was lacking. In fact, there was very little data from employers echoing key messages on disability rights, suggesting UNCRPD-related input had limited impact. Neither was there sufficient advice provided to employers and others on how to challenge subtle, deeper-seated beliefs behind discrimination or the behaviours that result—both aspects which are needed to operationalise inclusive employment beyond tokenism.

There were also questions raised by ALG jobseeker participants in Kenya about the local OPD members' capacities to facilitate training without input on the necessary soft skills to promote inclusive working. These ALG participants suggested that inexperienced OPD trainers did not necessarily know how to train creatively or facilitate inclusively, just because they are disabled themselves. Indeed, feedback from OPD leaders indicated a need for more support in organising activities with other disabled people and a sense of unfairness in passing so much responsibility to local OPDs. The training was perceived by some as limited in scope and unlikely to achieve real attitude change and genuine inclusion, suggesting the need for an approach which goes deeper in addressing underlying assumptions while remaining practical. OPDs should neither be assumed to have the capacity or resources nor to be best placed to deliver highly specific and sensitive training.

#### 4.3.3 | Jobseekers valued networking opportunities and increased social capital

Our analysis found that many jobseekers most valued the relational and communication opportunities opened by the IW programme. They enjoyed meeting as a group:

*'I also have made many friends' (Jobseeker, LMA, Uganda).*

This helps address feelings of isolation. Some mentioned their appreciation of relationships with mentors:

*'Opening up to my mentor was a challenge at first. However, the mentor opened up first, sharing his journey - life story. This opened the door for me. ... feels like I have known my mentor for a long time. (Jobseeker ALG, Kenya).*

Another jobseeker emphasised the importance of regular contact for emotional support when things are tough in the workplace:

<sup>6</sup>More information about the BRIDGE programme is available through the International Disability Alliance website: <https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/content/bridge-crpdsdgs-training-initiative>

*'You should have conferences to encourage each other so that some who are discouraged can be supported. Always keep in touch with the jobseekers employed to support in emotional support. We need strong peer groups and networks'.* (Jobseeker LMA, Uganda).

The opportunity to network was highly valued and was seen as increasing social capital and collective influence:

*'Exposure to so many people who now believe in my abilities who promise to link me to available job opportunities'.* (Jobseeker LMA, Uganda).

*'Inclusion Works introducing us to key people, helping us to access key companies, helping us to access key meetings .... especially with companies, unions and private sectors'.* (OPD partner survey).

*'They can get the chance to meet the group members; sometimes attend different meetings and raise their demands in front of government officials and other stakeholders'.* (Women jobseeker ALG, Bangladesh).

This evidence illustrates how, in addition to the skills which trainings typically focus on, the opportunity to meet others increases social capital and 'power-within', which in time may increase the collective influence of groups of people with disabilities.

Overall, there was a feeling that more opportunity for meaningful engagement—following contact theory—would require the programme to focus more on networking across interest groups and also with those who are not yet aware of the possibility of disability inclusive employment (e.g. some employers and government agencies), rather than just communication between key consortium members.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

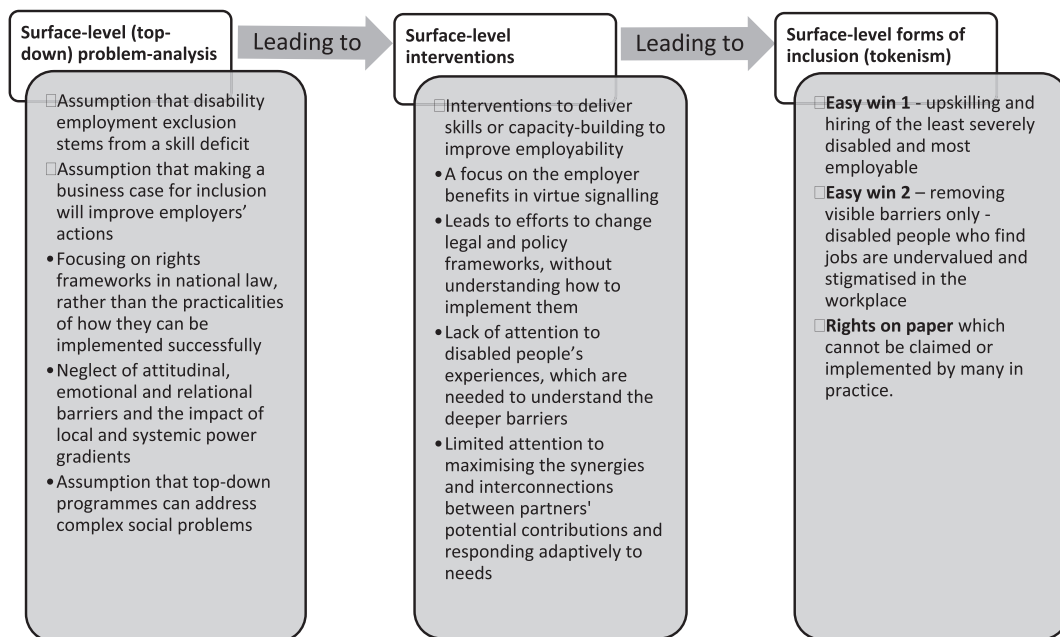
IW's intention in bringing together key INGOs (at global and national level), other national partners (such as government agencies), local organisations and OPDs (national and local level) to work on disability inclusive employment, was to enable collaboration across the social ecosystem (although not labelled this way in the programme planning process), to be synergetic and productive. In practice, disability inclusive development programmes have predominantly been initiated in top-down ways, focusing on separate (or at least not fully integrated) interventions with jobseekers, employers and OPDs. Analysis of the IW evidence generated confirms that shifting entrenched and deeply negative attitudes about disability and more intentionally addressing power imbalances is fundamental to inclusive employment, but these were not tackled adequately. It was not the predominant focus of the programme's interventions.

We propose that the root of this issue is a superficial problem analysis and interrogation is needed of the more entangled and complex aspects of inclusion. Otherwise only easy wins will be achieved. We summarise our analysis of this problematic in Table 1 and explain them in the following subsection.

### 5.1 | Interrogating the assumptions underlying the programmatic approach to generating inclusive employment

First, we found that in the IW activities there was a potentially oversimplistic assumption that the exclusion of persons with disabilities from employment stems primarily from a skill-capacity deficit. In response IW thus provided various training courses. For example, in Bangladesh, vocational, IT, job application and life/soft skill trainings were run after a needs assessment. Jobseekers enjoyed participating in such training events, and it boosted their



**TABLE 1** The consequences of surface-level problem analysis

confidence; however, some participants questioned whether any jobs had been created and how such trainings would help them overcome the problems of competition and limited responses to job applications. Often, those with stronger prior job market skill sets benefited:

*Out of seven participants, only one is doing a job. Three are interested in government sector desk jobs and are preparing. These participants have higher educational, Master's degrees or are undergraduates. The other participants have not applied for any job as their educational level is low. (Women Jobseekers' ALG, Bangladesh).*

This focus therefore leads to the 'easy win' of upskilling and hiring the already most employable people with disabilities.

In parallel to this, the second assumption is that making a business case for inclusion will improve employers' actions. This tackles some of the 'medicalised' focus of employer's concerns by raising employer awareness of benefits for them. However, this risks developing opportunities for those people who have the least complex impairments or who are seen as less challenging. Others are still employed only in a virtue signalling, potentially still 'charitable' approach (linked to CSR aims). The resulting superficial inclusive employment is not inclusive of the diversity of impairments (and severities) people have and indicates the persistence of limited understandings of what disability inclusion means or should look like in practice. An understanding of the need to focus on people's skills and needs for adaptation is still often missing.

This is compounded by the OPD sometimes narrow focus on 'disability rights', underpinned by a tacit third assumption that greater awareness of legal and policy frameworks (e.g. UNCRPD and national laws) will naturally lead to improvements. This is problematic, as what is crucially needed is not more policies but knowledge regarding how to implement or operationalise them, including how to address specific barriers and constraints in specific contexts and for specific impairments in practical ways.

These kinds of assumptions underlying a superficial problem analysis can lead to a lack of attention to disabled people's actual experiences, which are needed to understand the deeper and more intractable barriers to inclusive

employment. Such approaches are unlikely to lead to transformative solutions as they do not challenge the dominant economic thinking or associated ableist values that lead to precarious and competitive work for all, based solely on the ability to sell productive skills on the market rather than sustainable livelihoods.

IW did set out to learn from many stakeholders' experiences during the programme, and therefore, we have learnt about some attitudinal, relational and emotional barriers to inclusive employment, as we have reported here. Jobseekers' lack of *power-within* or sense self-efficacy and value continues to result in them unfairly feeling they are a burden and that they need to work harder than others. This is not helped by advocacy messaging or business case narratives that suggest employees with disabilities are particularly productive and obedient. For example, the idea that disabled employees are likely to be loyal may simply be that once they have a job, they are reluctant to leave, even if the work situation is less than ideal, because of fear about the fairness of recruitment process and so the reduced likelihood of getting another job.

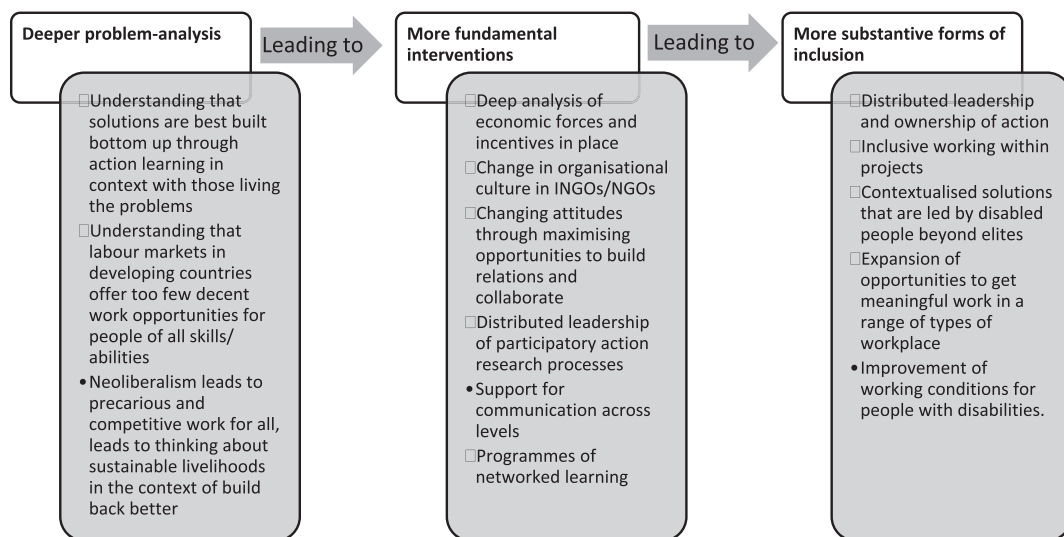
The programmatic gaps were compounded; we suggest, by the hierarchical nature of project management with mainly linear programme logic (theory of change), which resulted in rather siloed activities that constrained the potentials for more systemic impact across the ecosystem. For example, interventions with jobseekers and employers mostly happened separately, which meant that contact theory (where employees might meet and learn from disabled jobseekers) was not in action to any degree, particularly for the more excluded impairment groups. This limited the development of more open, deep and productive communications between the different actors and groups that might have enabled effective adaptive learning.

## 5.2 | Deeper problem analysis and contextualised solutions (Table 2)

Large consortium programmes like IW are premised on the idea that bringing a range of INGOs and local partners together and working across the stakeholder *ecosystem* is more efficient and effective than single-partner projects. This sounds sensible in theory. However, top-down programming to manage a large number of actors and organisation can be problematic as it loses what could be gain in having diverse membership. To begin, it may be assumed that there is already deep and nuanced understanding at the 'top' of the issues in particular settings and that activities can be designed by external stakeholders and rolled out across contexts. This was not the intended design of IW, which aspired to build on adaptive learning, but the hierarchical programme structure limited opportunities to make the most of the synergies between partners' potential contributions, to build relations across levels and contexts, to imagine how to weave interconnected interventions, and to respond adaptively in a timely manner to emergent needs. Additionally, the relatively short length of the programme (3 years for the intervention phase) has not allowed enough time for such intersecting and complex systemic changes to occur. More time is needed to bring about ecosystem change at all the levels.

The second deeper problem analysis (Table 2) involves understanding that disability inclusive employment may be more challenging in labour markets in low-income contexts than elsewhere. The prospects of finding 'decent' work are limited for people in the whole population, as jobs that provide a fair income, protection and opportunities for personal development are few and far between (Fox et al., 2020). In many cases, jobseekers with disabilities are in competition against a large pool of other applicants. The often small size of the formal sector means that many policies and interventions only ever reach a small subset of workplaces (Sumberg et al., 2020). A shallow analysis fails to recognise such objective structural challenges and prioritises 'easy wins' and limited technical fixes over more radical structure-changing actions to address 'vexing problems'.

The third problem is that, at the same time, neoliberal market reforms have made the forces of competition very strong, forcing disabled jobseekers and workers to justify themselves even more in the language of productivity and profitability. The cost competitiveness pressures of global value chains in unfettered global markets place and limits on investments that employers are prepared to undertake harden the need for a strong short-term bottom-line 'business case' for inclusion. Limited government budgets restrict the size of possible policies or interventions to

**TABLE 2** Towards a deeper problem analysis and more transformative interventions

deliver larger programmes for enhancing accessibility or shifting public attitudes. As a result, businesses have often been identified as key actors for change but have acted on disability inclusion as ‘a project’ through CSR framings rather than embracing it throughout their organisations. This does not make their actions inauthentic or meaningless window-dressing but simply means that businesses are most likely to act where they can maximise profits, recognise a strategic self-interest and where they foresee minimal disruption to the core business (Krichewsky, 2014). A deeper problem analysis recognises that the business case for inclusion only becomes real where the changes cost relatively little, engender cost savings and/or are likely to generate increased revenues. This means that businesses, regardless of what their decision-makers’ attitudes or biases may be, have reasons to employ people with disabilities who are already nearest to their perceived employability threshold and for whom minimal adaptations are needed. Sometimes, they plan to hire people on lower/subsidised wages or for deskilled activities or to take action in scenarios where greater visibility can enhance profitability without seeing these approaches as problematic. The latter can lead to the pursuit of reputationally based ‘easy wins’, such as installing a visible access ramp at the front of a building, while not ensuring there is an accessible toilet inside (Thompson et al., 2022) nor working intentionally on changes of attitude within the wider workforce. This deeper problem analysis clarifies that the business case for inclusion will always be limited and selective and that full inclusion requires broader, systemic changes.

Our point is not to offer prescriptions but rather to indicate what kind of approach could generate deeper problem analyses which may help to develop more fundamental interventions. These in turn could deliver more substantive forms of inclusion (Table 2). The problems we have discussed are ‘vexing’ in the sense that they are complex and no obvious universal solutions are known.

One crucial alternative to the rather hierarchical approach taken in IW is a participatory networking approach to building large programmes which can analyse problems in-depth and develop new ideas for transformative change (Burns et al., 2021 p. 28). This approach is rooted in complexity thinking about structural problems and how systemic change happens (Green, 2016) and deep (rather than co-opted, diluted or instrumentalised) participatory action research processes (Burns & Worsley, 2015). ‘Social inclusion innovation’ involves building new knowledge to tackle the entrenched issues faced by disadvantaged and excluded groups (George et al., 2012). This programmatic approach seeds and generates social inclusion innovation and local ownership through PAR processes with the most marginalised groups in context, focused on what matters to them and implemented through bottom-up ‘distributed’ leadership (Shaw et al., 2022). The knowledge and inclusive practices developed are then scaled out and up through networking and communication, a process that can be compared with social movement building

(Burns & Worsley, 2015). The IW ALG groups intended to seed this kind of activity, but the combination of the pandemic and resourcing constraints meant that sadly they did not progress to the action learning stage. There would have also needed to be more emphasis on relation building, communications and networking following free-association and distributed leadership principles to maximise the potential of this approach.

### 5.2.1 | Limitations of the programme approach and the research process and methodologies

The ALG process was severely disrupted by Covid-19 restrictions. The groups started later than planned, and most meetings were held virtually rather than face to face. These disruptions were a major factor in limiting the groups in developing the 'action' aspect of the work, which subsequently constrained the insights available from learning-in-action about how to tackle the barriers to inclusive employment. Additionally, although the ALG meetings had finished, the data were still being analysed at the time of writing this paper. As a result, the finalised synthesis was not all available to include here.

An important further limitation of the programme, and hence also of the research evidence and material presented here, is the relatively poor recruitment and representation of people from more marginalised impairment groups. Despite various efforts during the programme to address this common issue, the majority of the jobseekers who participated in the programme (and hence in the ALGs) had physical and visual impairments which are the least stigmatised and marginalised impairment types and for whom the types of support and access needs are arguably more easily understood and provided. Those with communication, intellectual, psychosocial or complex impairments are generally underrepresented in the programme overall and therefore in the data discussed in this paper.

Like the ALGs, the learning reviews were also conducted largely online due to Covid-19. While every effort was made for these processes to be inclusive, the participation of some stakeholders may well have been limited due to technology and the communications challenges involved with holding such events online. This means that the insights from the learning events are likely to be biased towards those disabled jobseekers with technological access and who are more able to communicate confidently and effectively online. This further exacerbates the lack of inclusion of participants with marginalised impairment types raised above.

Finally, it is important to note that the LMAs were undertaken and the project reports written, by consortium partners who were INGOs not by the present authors who were the academic partner. As such, data from these sources are presented here as a synthesis, rather than as our own primary research. While we trust the research integrity of the partners, it is important to reflect on the fact that we the authors had limited involvement in the production of the LMAs and the project reports drawn on here.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

There are barriers at different levels of the system, some shallow and some deeper. Very linear approaches to fixing a wicked problem are unlikely to address or even recognise the complexity of the situation. Doing siloed activities with employers and employees which attempt to fix parts of the problem in isolation will not work if the attitudinal and structural aspects are not shifted to support transformational change throughout the system. A more in-depth and nuanced analysis is needed which would lead to a greater range of interventions aiming not for easy fixes but for long-term wins. A careful investigation of the entrenched blockages and underlying beliefs is needed to bring about major shifts in practice, to mirror the legislation and treaties that are mainly already in place. This shift is bigger than the arena of employment—it is about the fundamentals of how people are valued in real life situations and how legislation and human rights treaties can promote this.

To address this, fundamentally people with disabilities need to be seen as full citizens who are automatically 'in' and have a right to expect to be in, rather than outside systems. Their habitual liminality and othering needs to be challenged and addressed, so that they become regarded as full and autonomous citizens. There is need for good role models, as well as a reduction in stigma particularly for those from the most marginalised impairment groups and a longer-term view of what change needs to happen.

Currently, people with disabilities are (albeit usually accidentally) excluded and not regarded as a regular part of the workforce or are seen as and expected to be beneficiaries from rather than contributors to society. Deeper analysis is a prerequisite for more fundamental and long-term structural change, which will also lead to elimination of the insidious structural violence that disabled people experience across sectors and contexts. This will take longer intervention timescales and system-level thinking.

Thus, shallow approaches, which do not address deep-seated cultural beliefs and assumptions about disability and disabled people (which are pervasive throughout the ecosystem), are likely to perpetuate the existence of opportunities for the already more privileged elite and further disadvantage the rest.

In this programme, the use of ALGs as part of the research associated with the interventions was an attempt to gather in-depth and more nuanced data from key stakeholders and to learn from them what possible solutions might be. However, the timescale was too short to move from problem identification to action and a larger number and diversity of groups would be needed to get a fuller picture of what jobseekers and employers (as well as other potential types of groups) think would work best in precipitating substantial and lasting change.

A key point is that intervention designs for disability inclusive employment in middle- and low-income country contexts should emerge from a process, rather than specifying in advance what kinds of interventions are needed. Social inclusion innovation would then tackle the vexing issues by involving participants in trial-and-error learning about practical solutions. This would shift the dynamics by positioning disabled people as change actors, including those who are often excluded by gender, impairment type or other intersecting identities. The full and equal participation of disabled people in the world of work is still a wicked problem without a clear solution and it needs further attention.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest, and the views expressed in this paper are their own, not necessarily those of IDS or the Inclusion Works programme.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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