

Mainstreaming disability inclusive employment in international development

1 | INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

People with disabilities are under-represented in the global workforce, and this problem is often particularly acute in the 'global south'. This special issue seeks to provide new perspectives on why this is the case and comprises seven papers focused on disability inclusive employment. We deliberately wanted to place this collection in the *Journal of International Development* as a core development publication, rather than in a disability specific one, because we think it is important to 'mainstream'¹ disability within development so that the international community can develop an increased understanding and awareness of disability dilemmas. The challenges faced by disabled people need to be tackled as part of all development thinking and programming.

The issue of employment and livelihoods for people with disabilities is gaining increased attention from funders, policymakers, scholars and practitioners, with funding expanding for interventions aiming to fix the complex problems constraining the opportunities for decent work for disabled people (Hanass-Hancock & Mitra, 2016; Steffens, 2021; Wickenden et al., 2020). Sadly, it exists pretty much universally across our planet in high-, middle- and low-income settings. The problem is not just one of unequal access to work but also of inequalities experienced by people with disabilities when in work:

When disabled people do work, they generally do so for longer hours and lower incomes, have fewer chances of promotion, and are at greater risk of becoming unemployed for longer periods. (Tripney et al., 2015, p. 11)

The Sustainable Development Goals' (UN, 2015) call to 'leave no one behind' is particularly pertinent for people with disabilities, for whom being excluded has often been their regular experience to date. However, this is now beginning to change as recognition and funding for disability-focussed intervention programmes and research are rising up the international development agenda.

This collection of papers covers a range of issues pertinent to the topic of disability inclusive employment from different practical and theoretical standpoints and focuses on a range of countries and contexts in the 'global south'. We invited contributions from a wide range of authors, intentionally encouraging those who had not previously written for academic journals, to submit, including NGO practitioners, representatives of organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs) and other allies and activists. Support during the writing process was available to those who needed it, and opportunities to be involved in reviewing other papers in the collection were also offered. Thus, these papers reflect an aspiration for different perspectives to be brought in various dilemmas and challenges to be highlighted regarding the progress towards achieving a disability inclusive society generally, and specifically towards people with disabilities having access to meaningful employment on an equal basis. At the same time, we cannot deny that such a special issue, put together by a team of nondisabled scholars based in north-western Europe, and

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drawing directly and indirectly our established networks, remains, in John Gaventa's (2020: 118f) terminology, an 'invited space' shaped by hidden and invisible forms of power, offering selected entry points for influence and change. Nonetheless, we are content that this collection represents a much-needed starting point for mainstreaming and deepening the engagement with disability inclusive employment in international development.

In this editorial, we first lay out some foundational concepts and issues that are relevant to all the individual papers, which may be helpful orientation for readers who are new to the disability field especially as knowledge of these is assumed in some of the papers. Subsequently, we explore some of the similarities across the papers and explain how the discussions overlap and complement each other. This highlights the key features of the current disability inclusive (or often exclusionary) employment landscape.

Firstly, a note about language use in this special Issue: terminology in the disability field is highly contested. In many parts of the world, including in much of Asia and Africa, 'person first' language is preferred, thus 'person with disabilities', 'women with disabilities' and so on. This is in line with the UN system and particularly the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006). However, some scholars and activists, particularly in the United Kingdom, United States and elsewhere, including the editorial team here, prefer 'disabled people', 'disabled women' and so on. This is because it echoes the ethos of the 'social model of disability',² the current dominant theoretical paradigm in disability discourses (Shakespeare, 2013). Therefore, in this set of papers both usages will be found, some authors choosing to alternate between them, others preferring one or the other.

2 | SOME FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS RELATING TO DISABILITY INCLUSIVE EMPLOYMENT

People with disabilities have been estimated to make up roughly 15% of the global population (WHO and World Bank, 2011), although this figure is currently being refined and may be revised downwards to around 10% in most contexts (Mont, 2019). Disability is defined as the outcome of a combination of a person's health condition, their impairments (e.g., physical, sensory including visual and hearing, intellectual and psychosocial), the environment and the response of society to these differences (UN, 2006). Thus, the level of difficulty someone has is partly dependent on the response of others around them. They are amongst the poorest and most disadvantaged people worldwide and substantially under-represented in formal and informal employment globally (Abidi & Sharma, 2014; Backup, 2009; Mizunoya & Mitra, 2012; Tripney et al., 2015). Therefore, disability inclusion has become a compelling policy imperative in many countries. The phrase 'disability inclusive development' sums up this approach which it is anticipated will in time be operationalised globally and in a wide range of situations and across all sectors of activity (such as livelihoods promotion). Disability activists and allies envision a time when the inclusion of people with disabilities in all human activities will be the norm, not the exception. Then inclusion will be part of everyday life, not needing any special interventions or attention to make it happen.

Disability inclusion is a relatively new idea. Although 'inclusion' as a broader concept is now commonly used in many aspirational documents across development discourses, *disability* inclusion needs specific explanation and intentional attention. It appeared first in relation to education (i.e., Inclusive Education) nearly three decades ago, promoting the idea that disabled children have a right to be educated alongside their nondisabled peers rather in segregated institutions such as special schools. The inclusion movement has accelerated and broadened over time, with a considerable surge of awareness, success and spread globally, and especially since the launching of the groundbreaking UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (UN, 2006). This treaty underlined the importance of an inclusive approach across sectors, so concepts such as 'inclusive health' and 'inclusive employment' are now gaining traction in many contexts, at least in theory. Segregated services and activities are now seen as exclusionary, limiting disabled people's opportunities and contrary to the UNCRPD.

Disability was largely absent in the Millennium Development Goals agenda, but the movement towards disability inclusive societies was further bolstered by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2015), which contain

multiple mentions of the concept across 17 goals. In the SDGs, however, inclusion has a broader usage, promoting the idea of equity for all marginalised and disempowered groups, not just in relation to disability. In the SDG era, the term has also increasingly featured in framings which questionably fuse social inclusion agendas with market- and business-led development strategies, such as 'inclusive growth', 'inclusive markets', 'inclusive business', 'inclusive capitalism' and 'financial inclusion' (Baron et al., 2019: 15-16; Mader & Morvant-Roux, 2019).

Understandings about what disability inclusion specifically means or really entails in practice, and how to address intractable blockages, lags behind the global treaties and goals. Good intentions at policy level do not yet transfer effectively into implementation in context. This means interventions can often be tokenistic, leading to the treaties and laws being seen as impotent. Across all the sectors, including employment, it is more difficult than it first appears to achieve real equity and disability inclusion.

Inclusion entails mainstream entities, such as employers, shifting their intentions and practice towards a positive view of difference and diversity and ensuring that applicants and, subsequently, employees with disabilities are welcomed. They need to be provided with the support they need to get jobs, to work comfortably alongside other employees, to feel respected, supported and able to contribute and progress in the workplace. Adaptations required by people with disabilities (such as physical or communication changes in the environment) are called 'reasonable accommodations'. These must be complemented by changes in attitudes towards people with disabilities (Saleh & Bruyere, 2018). As well as the more obvious visible adaptations such as ramps, accessible bathrooms, sign language interpretation, braille and specific software, there are more subtle and 'invisible' changes in the environment and behaviour of others that may be needed to enable someone to feel fully included in the workplace.

Disability rights: A shift in thinking about disability happened/began with the emergence of the 'social model' of disability, which went through various iterations over the last 20-30 years (Thomas, 2004). This approach contrasts with the previous 'medical and individual' models, which assume that disability is a personal and often health-related matter, not a concern of society more widely. More lately, these ideas have evolved into a 'human rights' model. This reconceptualization of disability and suggestions for action, placed a strong emphasis on individuals' right to autonomy and independence (e.g., the independent living movement in the United States) and importantly societies' responsibilities to adapt to include everyone. The UN Convention (UN, 2006) epitomised and cemented this shift and following its launch and promulgation there has been plenty of theoretical aspiration for equity and realisation of rights in many of the 180+ states that have so far signed up to it. People are supposed to have a right to choose the kind of lives they lead and to equal access to all the key ingredients for a good life and positive wellbeing: health, education, livelihoods/work, social and political life and so on. The responsibility to ensure that these rights are accessible to all lies with society as a whole but is enacted through specific duty bearers such as state actors. Differences between people are then regarded as incidental, their difference from a supposed 'norm' accepted as part of human diversity and perhaps celebrated, rather than as a matter of embarrassment, exclusion and discrimination (Cameron, 2014). This shift towards 'people focused' approaches mirrors debates in development studies around autonomy, resonating strongly with Sen's (1999) ideas on framing development as 'freedom'. The right to make and be involved in choices and to have freedom of opportunity are relevant themes to both.

Importantly, the UNCRPD also outlines a specific role for OPD in promoting rights, as advocating for and monitoring progress towards inclusion and policy influencing. Uniquely, the treaty has mandated these groups of representatives of disabled people to be much more active and powerful than they previously were, and this has shifted at least to some extent the activities OPDs do from mutual support and local advocacy towards project planning and management, evaluation and high-level representation. This has not been without its tensions (Myers, 2016).

Financial autonomy: Historically then, until the start of the 21st century, images and expectations of disabled people were predominantly as people who were likely to be net beneficiaries of support, usually in a charitable form, rather than net contributors who could participate socially and contribute financially to society and be autonomous. Of course, there have been some notable exceptions, and these tend to be individuals from elite backgrounds, who have substantial social capital through education and or family connections. They are also often those with

impairments that are less marginalised (e.g., physical or visual impairments rather than more stigmatised cognitive, communication and psychosocial difficulties).

Disabled people may often be viewed as the 'deserving poor' (they cannot help being poor, and hence are deserving of help), who can expect to be cared for, thus instigating charity models of support (from the state or others). These responses do provide for the person's material needs but leave them in a diminished position and dependent on others. They are judged by others to lack the skills to be autonomous, especially as workers, which, especially in societies that rely heavily on market exchange for provisioning, risks consigning them to partial citizenship and continued lack of access to work, especially more formal employment (Roulstone, 2012). If excluded from employment, their value as citizens may be further reduced, in a vicious cycle. This exclusion might be particularly true in societies where personhood (status as a person and citizenship) is linked to people's financial contribution to their households and, perhaps more importantly, to the state through paying tax.

Thus, if people perceived as disabled are not given equal access to employment, they remain disempowered and marginalised, and easily regarded as of little worth in society. A steep power gradient between disabled and non-disabled people, where the former is assumed to be dependent on the latter is perpetuated. The UNCRPD aspires to break this deadlock, but such negative and exclusionary attitudes and expectations remain very embedded in many cultural contexts and form a large but invisible mass below the waterline of (what we may call) the inclusion iceberg. Above the waterline is a small peak of progress and positive practice, underneath is a complex mass of misunderstandings and blocks that are unseen and uncontested.

3 | OVERVIEW OF THE PAPERS IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The seven papers included here address dilemmas within the disability inclusive employment arena from various angles and in diverse cultural and socio-political contexts. Some have a multi-country focus (e.g., Bialik & Mhiri, 2022; Morris et al., 2022; Shaw et al., 2022) while others discuss individual countries and situations (Ebuenyi et al., 2022: Kenya; Nkansah-Dwamena, 2022: Ghana; Remnant et al., 2022: Malawi; Yusupov & Abdukhalilov, 2022: Uzbekistan).

The special issue was planned, and the call for papers launched during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was important to include at least one paper about the economic impacts of the pandemic on a particular population (Ebuenyi et al., 2022). Other papers also discuss the pandemic as some of their data were collected during the acute period of the crisis. We have more contributions that draw on experience in Africa than elsewhere, although this was not intentional. We recognise that disability inclusive employment is an issue relevant to all countries and regions.

Disability inclusive employment is clearly a topic that needs exploration, evidence, analysis and action across various levels, from micro (individual people's experiences), meso (locally in the community) through to macro (global and state policies and provisions). These different aspects are often considered in isolation, when we feel what is needed is a more comprehensive and 'cross level' reflection, where the influences and connections on and between the levels are recognised and acted upon/addressed. This perspective is offered by Shaw et al. (2022). The other papers in this collection discuss the tricky problem of achieving inclusive employment from different standpoints and focus on various parts of the issue landscape. However, it is clear that when considering a complex problem, no single intervention will do the job alone. Thus, an overarching and system-focussed approach which considers all of these aspects will be needed, if change is to take place and be felt by substantial numbers of individual people with disabilities who are trying to get decent work, stay employed and move out of poverty.

It should be noted that although many of the papers do use the commonly accepted and rather flexible definition of disability used in the UNCRPD, some do not and use other definitions, which have a more individual/medical flavour. We have left these as written, to illustrate that the concept of disability is still in flux in relation to the way it is understood in different contexts and within different disciplinary backgrounds. Some of the papers provide overviews of these definitions, the models they are informed by and why these are relevant to particular contexts or arguments (e.g., Nkansah-Dwamena, 2022).

3.1 | Insights from the papers for mainstreaming disability inclusive employment in international development

There are some recurring themes and issues raised by several or all the papers. They use a range of methodologies but are mainly empirical qualitative studies, some with a strong participatory/co-construction or action research element and or linked to larger intervention programmes (Bialik & Mhiri, 2022; Morris et al., 2022; Shaw et al., 2022). This is appropriate for the topic, as it brings an inclusive action-orientated feel to the evidence collection processes and interpretation. Other papers focus on law and policy review and barrier analysis (Yusupov & Abdukhalilov, 2022). Many authors emphasise the need for research about disability related topics to reconsider seriously the way the kinds of reasonable accommodations are provided for participants (i.e., inclusive practice), in order to ensure genuinely meaningful participation of people with a range of impairments, based on involving, hearing and responding to the concerns of real people.

Some papers have a specific gender or impairment focus, and this is important, as we know that rates of unemployment are much higher everywhere for women with disabilities than for men, and also that some impairment groups are particularly excluded from the jobs market. All the papers except Bialik and Mhiri (2022) and Nkansah-Dwamena (2022) address the inclusive employment agenda for a range of people with varied impairment types. The former authors focus on people with intellectual disabilities specifically, and we were glad to include this paper with its very participatory and inclusive approach, as this group is usually excluded from research and disability debates. Nkansah-Dwamena (2022) addresses the concerns of women with mental health impairments.

Many of the papers reference the importance of the global treaties, the involvement of international bodies such as ILO (2015) (and, linked to them, the Global Business Disability Network) and the overarching disability representative organisations such as IDA (International Disability Alliance). The relationships between these and the national and local bodies such as national disability umbrella organisations are not addressed specifically by any of the papers, and this is something that perhaps needs further investigation. Many of the papers mention the implementation gap between governments signing the UNCRPD, producing their own national laws and policies on disability rights, and what happens in practice. This is a recurring theme throughout the wider body of disability literature globally.

It is accepted widely that disabled people are very often economically vulnerable, and they are disproportionately represented amongst the poor. The mechanisms driving this are thought to be that it is harder to get a job and keep it for disabled people and also reduced access to finance, extra expenses, reduced social capital, less community support and more stigma to deal with. Increased risk of job loss for people with disabilities during economic downturns and other crises (e.g., as an impact of a pandemic) is mentioned by several of the papers (Bialik & Mhiri, 2022; Ebuenyi et al., 2022). Taking an intersectional view, we can see the overlapping inequalities that disabled people face. They are already in precarious economic positions and are vulnerable to catastrophic expenditures and losses of income, as their work (if they can get it) is often in the informal sector and without long-term security and typically not protected by employment laws.

Some of papers report on research linked to intervention programmes working on disability inclusive employment and thus provide recommendations for programme planners and for policy level action (Bialik & Mhiri, 2022; Ebuenyi et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2022; Remnant et al., 2022; Shaw et al., 2022; Yusupov & Abdukhalilov, 2022). There are clear overlaps and synchronies in what they say. Some emphasise the removal of barriers that will benefit people with all types of impairment (and other people), while others focus on making gender, impairment or context specific suggestions or addressing issues at specific levels (i.e., individual, community and structural).

Reading across the papers, a key message is that instrumental types of intervention such as policy and practice guidelines, provision of assistive devices and soft skills training for jobseekers with disabilities are necessary but not sufficient to bring about wholesale change towards disability inclusive employment. At the individual level, a call for the promotion of really effective capacity building for self-advocacy, empowerment and self-determination as well as very targeted skill building that matches market needs, rather than ill-fitting generic vocational training approaches, echoes across multiple papers (e.g., Bialik & Mhiri, 2022; Remnant et al., 2022; Shaw et al., 2022).

Looking beyond disabled people themselves, training and practical advice on disability awareness, fundamental attitude change towards a culture of acceptance of difference and understanding rights arguments is crucial for community actors and employers, who have often had little exposure to these ideas (Nkansah-Dwamena, 2022). The UNCRPD (article 27) is widely cited in the papers, but some problematise the way it is actually enacted, as often limited by common assumptions made by duty bearers such as employers about what is possible. Often there remains a medical or charity model 'feel' to their approaches (Remnant et al., 2022). Employing disabled people is still regularly seen as economically risky compared to employing nondisabled people, with extra costs and lower productivity being expected. Governments are of course potential employers as well as policy-makers, and this is sometimes mentioned, although more of the focus is on private sector employment. There is clearly a need for increased efforts by governments as employers to lead the way in being inclusive (Nkansah-Dwamena, 2022). Other key actors of importance include trade unions. The paper by Remnant et al. (2022) is unique in being based on partnership with these (in Malawi) and looking at their role and perspectives.

In relation to the benefits of inclusive employment for employers versus for disabled people themselves, more has been said about the latter than the former. Research on the former also more often addresses current rather than prospective employers' perspectives and is more likely to be undertaken in high-income countries than middle- or low-income regions. This imbalance is corrected to some extent by this set of papers, as employees in Asia and Africa's views are represented widely in the special issue.

The role of civil society actors such as local OPDs and their national umbrella bodies, as key stakeholders in promoting inclusive employment is discussed in several of the papers. The OPDs' relationship with both governments and NGOs (national and international) is shifting. OPDs' willingness and capacity to take on more formal evaluation, advocacy and training roles and the exact nature of the way they represent their constituents is dissected in some of the papers (e.g., Bialik & Mhiri, 2022; Remnant et al., 2022; Shaw et al., 2022). Inclusion of disabled people in policymaking through the involvement of their representatives is important in order to ensure that they are part of decision-making, but the way that this is operationalised is still evolving. It necessitates some changes in understanding amongst the other actors involved in policymaking. Thus, employers, governments and others need to become used to talking to disabled people in leadership positions.

The expectation that disabled people should be able to exercise an element of job choice and expect promotion, training and career progression once in a job, rather than just being given any job, comes up regularly. That disabled people have as finely tuned career aspirations and employment goals as others is something that is only now becoming recognised. Being able to choose a career trajectory is still unavailable to many (Shaw et al., 2022).

Another element of choice for disabled jobseekers is around the pros and cons of informal versus formal employment, and this dichotomy arises strongly in the studies. Often, there is an expressed preference for self-employment and development of one's own business as opposed to being employed either in large or small business or in government jobs. This is not uniform and the assumptions and policy implications of the fact that the majority of people work in the informal sector are discussed. The underlying reasons for the preference for informal work are not always clear. They may be disability related, or a result of people's experience of or expectation of discriminatory treatment at work, or part of a broader aspiration to be 'one's own boss' in some cultural contexts. The current switch to digital and remote forms of work (during and post the pandemic) has variable advantages and disadvantages for disabled people and is addressed by Morris et al. (2022). Working remotely can provide added and equal opportunities for some where online accessibility is available and for some types of work, but it does not remove discrimination and level the playing field for all.

Safeguarding and protection against various forms of abuse and bullying of disabled applicants or employees in the workplace arises as a key issue, as well as more insidious or less easily recognised forms of othering. This links with dilemmas around the conceptualisation of people with disabilities as being vulnerable as a group. Clearly, given increased risks of negative treatment, they are at greater risk than others, but at the same time, there is a general dislike by many of being seen as vulnerable and sometimes a desire to counteract this by masking or not revealing having an impairment. This apparent dilemma for employers needing to address people's access needs more openly and

also treat them equally and without fuss is perhaps confusing and difficult to navigate for those who are new to the disability inclusion arena.

At the structural, macro level, several of the papers suggest the need for a 'bird's eye view' of the inclusive employment landscape. Interventions at the individual and community level need to be complemented and linked to transformational change at the organisational, local and national government levels. An intentional and deliberate effort is required to recognise the need for implementation of policies. There need to be challenges to discrimination and rights abuses, and wholesale shifts in attitudes at all levels, so that disabled people really do experience equality of opportunities. Both Nkansah-Dwamena (2022) and Shaw et al. (2022) argue for change at this macro level and for more linkages and communication between levels of action.

Most of the papers, unsurprisingly, conclude that more research is needed on disability more broadly, both quantitative and qualitative, and including participatory and inclusive methodologies, in order to address the policy-practice implementation gap, as well as on specific aspects such as exploring the experiences and perspectives of women with disabilities' and people with particular impairments (specifically those at the bottom of an exclusionary 'hierarchy of impairment').³ Attention needs to be paid not just to the different levels of action: individual, community and structural but also to the disjuncture and needs for links between them.

Overall, this set of papers provides a rich and diverse set of perspectives and insights regarding the current state of play for disability inclusive employment as a global aspiration. There is plenty of nuance and detailed evidence to help the reader to understand this important but complex area of international development. We acknowledge that other work is also going on in this arena, which has not been covered in this special issue. We hope you enjoy the collection and find the papers useful in your own work, perhaps in terms of enabling you include an avowedly disability inclusive component.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Mainstreaming in disability discourse implies including disabled people in policies and programmes that are aimed at and designed for the general population, with appropriate disability inclusive adaptations, rather than providing separate or segregated disability-focussed services for this population. Sometimes a 'twin-track' approach is appropriate, where

disabled people are included in mainstream provision but there are also some specific services providing specialist inputs as required (e.g., in healthcare).

- ² The social model argues that people are disabled by society and that their disabled status is not inherent to them as people but is socially constructed.
- ³ Those with physical and visual impairment are generally less excluded than those with communication, psychosocial, cognitive and complex difficulties. This pattern is seen in many contexts and situations.

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