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The Involvement of Persons with Disabilities in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding Efforts: Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (PWD) as Part of the Solution in the Post-Conflict Arena

Summary

In 2007, the UN Secretary-General's Policy Committee defined peacebuilding as follows: "Peacebuilding involves a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development. Peacebuilding strategies must be coherent and tailored to specific needs of the country concerned, based on national ownership, and should comprise a carefully prioritized, sequenced, and therefore relatively narrow set of activities aimed at achieving the above objectives."

According to the Center for Disability Studies (2010), approximately 16% of all disabilities are war and conflict related. Many wars are low intensity conflicts which serve to disable people rather than to kill them. Not only is war responsible for death and disability, it also causes extreme mental and emotional harm to individuals, their families and the community at large.

Based on a related research literature review and 18 years of cross-listed academic courses from major universities, there is a general consensus across the board that very little literature has been written that addresses persons with disabilities and peacebuilding. Only a single case study conducted by Pearl Praise Gottschalk (2007) examined the experiences of persons disabled by war in the peace process in Sierra Leone. The participants in the study included all disabled individuals, pre- and post-conflict.

How and why do people with disabilities (PWD) should be included in the conflict resolution and peace process are questions raised by all concerned thought leaders and organizations that, up until now, has not been definitively explored.

About this Brief

The co-authors of this paper are Anita Aaron, Executive Director, World Institute on Disability (WID), and USIP's staff Danielle Lane and Ariana Barth. The information draws from literature research conducted by USIP and WID as well as discussions with subject matter experts in the international disability community and interviews with USIP's staff who have practical field experience working in post-conflict countries.

Challenges

A salient feature of the literature and case studies review is that of major challenges, including, but not limited to:
- All stakeholders currently see the disabled community as a homogenous group.
- Policy implementation is currently inadequate at all levels, in part due to cultural norms and current societal structures. This is why much of the literature stresses the importance of community-based and holistic approaches to inclusion.
- There is a policy divide that separates those disabled as a result of conflict and those with disabilities pre- or post-conflict (congenital, degenerative, accidental etc.). This is particularly detrimental with regards to the allocation of resources in the post-conflict legislative and development processes.
- Getting persons with disabilities to the table, not only physically, but also symbolically.
- Research indicates that in many cases the disabled populations are rarely self-represented; in these instances, urban representatives may have different needs and concerns from non-urban disabled populations.
- Ability expectations are unrealistic in many cases, causing a catch-22 effect. Even when represented at the table, many vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, are not prepared to advocate, negotiate, debate, and represent themselves to their greatest advantage as a result of existing structural violence (i.e. education, suffrage).

The Sierra Leone 2007 Case Study

Using only this case study as a starting point, the findings and lessons learned noted below are highly relevant for designing further case studies.

- *Focus of the Study:* Examining the Experiences of Persons Disabled by War in the Peace Process in Sierra Leone (West Africa) 2007.
- *Participants:* All individuals included in this study as subjects were disabled.
- *Sample:* It was a group of about 100 out of a pool of 1000 (10% of the total disabled persons in Sierra Leone) who were the victims that survived the country's civil war. Thousands died due to serious injuries and lack of appropriate medical care.

Pearl Praise Gottschalk collected the data by interviewing this targeted pool of 100 people representing all four major tribes, Mende, Temne, Limba, and Krio (every effort was made to achieve appropriate balance between males and females). Many females were reluctant and/or unable to participate because they lacked transportation and had no social support system in place. The following aspects of the participants' experiences were examined:
1. Inclusion and Participation in the Decision Making
   Findings: Most of the participants reported that they were never included in the decision-making process affecting them, either by the local government authorities or by international agencies, such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other United Nations agencies. Utilizing Unique Initiative
   Findings: This option was not utilized.
2. Dissention Among Disabled Group

Findings: There was considerable disagreement among the disabled group on issues such as the way they were treated and the way they were compensated.

3. Justice Unfulfilled
Findings: Almost all the participants expressed their disappointment that the justice was not delivered. They all expressed disappointments with the meager compensation of $250 per person that they received. They were not consulted by any of the agencies involved in setting the level of compensation they received.

4. Serious Unintended Consequences
Findings: All members of the disabled group fear retribution due to their participation with the Truth and Reconciliation Court providing them the evidence of cruelties by the perpetrators.

ADDITIONAL INSIGHT DERIVED FROM THIS STUDY

1. Female population was more severely affected by this war when they became disabled. Their husbands disowned and deserted them and they ended up taking care of their dependent children. They also were more vulnerable to be the victims of sexual harassment and abuse.
2. When they were asked "Whom do you trust?" They indicated they did not trust their own Government or external agencies, such as the United Nations agencies.
3. They trusted the non-government organizations (NGO) and private voluntary organizations (PVO) because these groups existed for the sole purpose of assisting them.

Moving from the Charity/Medical Model to the Social Justice Model

As the charity and medical models have fallen by the wayside as reasonable approaches for addressing persons with disabilities and disability, like gender, age and sexual orientation, has become a human rights and social justice issue; the role of persons with disabilities in peacebuilding has also reportedly evolved. To move from a charity model to a human rights model meant that persons with disabilities were no longer viewed as the problem but as persons with rights; as subjects rather than objects. (UNHCR), *The Current Use and Future Potential of United Nations Human Rights Instruments in the Context of Disability*, (Geneva: 2002), 1-2.)

The binding, comprehensively endorsed standard for disability rights was the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for People with Disabilities, adopted by the General Assembly in 1993 and was demonstrable proof that the United Nations had elevated disability concerns to issues of rights and justice. This agreement was further defined and evolved by the development of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) or "the convention" which has caused interest by international human rights non-government organizations (NGOs) toward addressing the rights of people with disabilities as an inclusive component of who they serve.

The General Assembly of the United Nations adopted UNCRPD, the first human rights treaty to be adopted in the 21st century. Containing 50 articles, the UNCRPD provides a recognized international standard for the human rights of persons with disabilities (*Article 11* requires States Parties "to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and the occurrence of natural disasters")*.* It would stand to reason this evolution would encourage conflict and peacebuilding donors, organizations, policymakers and field practitioners to fully implement the principles of a human rights-based approach in their work, which demands the participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in all processes and activities that affect their enjoyment of human rights. It appears that most civil society

actors have yet to embrace this mandate to include disability leaders/NGOs as civil society participants in their funding, research or peacebuilding initiatives.

The next logical, evolutionary step for persons with disabilities on the world stage would be, it would seem, to follow that of women as actors in their own destinies, not as bystanders to it.
People with disabilities have shown their skills and abilities in the advocacy field with the passage of legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and with the UNCRPD. However, both actions mark long years of efforts to establish civil rights for a segment of the population within the broader population. Being an integral component of the peacebuilding community would be an indication that people with disabilities are seen as part of the peacebuilding movement and not separate from it, excluded from it or irrelevant to it.

In addition, the social model of disability which depicts the issue of "disability" as a socially created problem and a matter of the full integration of individuals into society and, therefore, including people with disabilities into the peacebuilding process is the socially just approach. The politics of disablement. (see Oliver 1990).

Why Include Persons with Disabilities in the Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding Process?

The **market model** of disability is a minority rights and consumerist oriented view of disability that recognizes people with disabilities and their stakeholders as representing a large group of consumers, employees and voters. This model looks to personal identity to define disability and empowers people to chart their own destiny in everyday life, with a particular focus on economic empowerment. By this model, based on US Census data, there are 1.2 billion people in the world who consider themselves to have a disability. An additional two billion people are considered stakeholders in disability (family/friends/employers), and when compared to the number of people without disabilities, represents 53% of the population. This model states that, due to the size of the demographic, companies, and governments will serve the desires, pushed by demand as the message becomes prevalent in the cultural mainstream.

Viewed through the lens of the marketing model, to eliminate people with disabilities from the peacebuilding table would be tantamount to skewing the representation of the community to an extent that would alter the potential outcome desired from the peacebuilding efforts.

In addition, since one of the most critical impacts of armed conflict is the number of newly disabled people resulting from the conflict and, therefore, those most impacted, the lack of inclusion of people with disabilities takes on an even more critical role if the outcome of the peacebuilding effort is to be long-lasting.

How to include Persons with Disabilities in the Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding Process?

Understanding the current state of research and common practices suggest the following:

- People with disabilities may have a role in highlighting structural violence in societies and spearheading the movement to transform relationships. This may first happen between non-disabled and disabled communities, and eventually can set the stage for wider work between oppressor/oppressed groups (See Kerr (2013)). If this is indeed an avenue to pursue in terms of policy recommendation, it would be worthwhile to address the policy/implementation gap at

the outset, identifying action plans when a local, regional or national government is realistically unprepared or culturally averse to taking seriously such practices.

- One major debate with regard to people with disabilities and conflict resolution and formal peace processes is over the following assumption: "if a particular society/country/culture (all of these terms needing to be defined) does not adequately value the needs of the disabled community pre-conflict that it will not do so in the rebuilding process." The literature has reflected both sides of the debate. This might be a promising avenue for future case studies on disability and conflict/peacebuilding.

- The literature on all aspects of disability studies as related to conflict and development overwhelmingly argues that the disability community must be present at the table. This can include legislative decisions, community development projects, negotiations, and local peacemaking practices, to name a few. More specifically, the war disabled as well as those with congenital disabilities or disabilities acquired pre-conflict must all be included, as their needs are distinct, though sometimes overlapping. It is also suggested that representatives from each side of the conflict are represented.

Fundamental Principles: The Disability Perspective

- The inclusion of persons with disabilities in civil society resolving conflict and peacebuilding initiatives will make a significant contribution in resolving conflict and creating and sustainable peace between communities.

- When disability leaders/NGOs are included in civil society's conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts, field practitioners are fostering the inclusion of all affected populations, which contributes to the successful implementation of peacebuilding initiatives.

- There is a strong incentive for disability leaders/NGOs to support civil society's efforts to ensure the provision of security and peace because persons with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by civil conflicts through the loss of basic needs and an increase in the numbers of persons with disabilities from combat and civilian casualties.

- Including disability leaders/NGOs in the civil society peacebuilding process increases the effectiveness and innovation of peacebuilding initiatives because disability leaders/NGOs bring key experiences and specific skills that are directly applicable to implementing effective peacebuilding initiatives.

- The fundamental commonality of the experience of disability in all societies is a powerful and successful unifying theme for peacebuilding initiatives across conflict divides.

- That a disability focused, civil society peacebuilding initiatives across conflict divides can be successful when initiatives by other civil society actors are not politically tolerated.

- That the legitimacy of the negative attitude of policymakers and field practitioners expressed in private statements like, "Why should we include in our efforts one of the least-empowered, least powerful segments of society when the problem is with decision makers?" needs to be challenged.

Recommendations

With so much political upheaval and growing conflict in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Southwest Asia, there is a sea of change (almost a tsunami effect) where people all over the globe are demanding equal rights for all including the "untouchables" in India to all people with disabilities and sexual orientation. It's the opportune time in 2014 to take a comprehensive look and take the evolution of the world view toward persons with disabilities from charity/medical model to community based rehabilitation/human rights model to the global, all-inclusive model of persons with disabilities as equal participants in the solution to document inclusion if and where it exists; to evaluate the impact of the involvement of persons with disabilities in peacebuilding efforts—both in conflict resolution and in the lives of the individuals with disabilities involved in the peace process.

This can be achieved by initiating, developing and funding a series of case studies documenting the contribution by people with disabilities in countries active in conflict resolution. The special contribution made by people with disabilities will focus on their critical role in the process of conflict resolution, without violence in countries as an aftermath of natural disaster, civil war, ethnic and tribal violence.

The evolution of the world view toward persons with disabilities from charity/medical model to community based rehabilitation/human rights model to the global, all-inclusive model of persons with disabilities as equal participants in the solution brings us to the next logical step of including, by design, persons with disabilities in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. This step will create both opportunity for the individual to be part of their community and for the community to enjoy the benefit of full inclusion in the conflict resolution process but will also create a shared responsibility between community members with and without disabilities.

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