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# Development System Locks Out the Disabled

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# Development System Locks Out the Disabled

**Abstract**
[Excerpt] That the non government (NGO) industry is a major player in the so called development cannot be over emphasized. That billion of dollars have been channeled into the sector to "wipe out" poverty particularly in poor developing countries is a fact.

Almost all the NGOs exist to serve the poorest of the poor, voiceless, the disadvantaged, vulnerable populations so to speak! Their mission statements clearly spell out that they operate to bridge the gap between the rich and poor. The NGOs share those pro-poor beliefs with the United Nations system and are bankrolled by the development partners. But do these partners in poverty alleviation and development consider the disabled as poor? If disabled people are not considered poor, and therefore, a major target for these partners, who then is poor? What is the definition of poor or poverty for that matter?

**Keywords**
disability, development, poverty, human rights

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# Development System Locks Out the Disabled

By Phitalis Were Masakhwe, February 2008

That the non government (NGO) industry is a major player in the so called development cannot be over emphasized. That billion of dollars have been channeled into the sector to “wipe out” poverty particularly in poor developing countries is a fact.

Almost all the NGOs exist to serve the poorest of the poor, voiceless, the disadvantaged, vulnerable populations so to speak! Their mission statements clearly spell out that they operate to bridge the gap between the rich and poor. The NGOs share those pro-poor beliefs with the United Nations system and are bankrolled by the development partners. But do these partners in poverty alleviation and development consider the disabled as poor? If disabled people are not considered poor, and therefore, a major target for these partners, who then is poor? What is the definition of poor or poverty for that matter?

According to World Bank, one out of every six absolutely poor people on the globe today has one form of impairment or the other. In other words one cannot purport to work for the poor and in the same breath exclude the disabled! That will be development hypocrisy alias apartheid! But a critical look at the development system as currently constituted says exactly that. Disabled are conspicuously missing in action.

Disabled people in Kenya and Africa at large have been watching this scenario with keen interest though.

They have seen NGOs continue to shun them in their policies, programmes, activities, reporting and monitoring including employment. They have seen the same with development partners in the allocation of their development money despite rosy policy statements on disability equality! And they have seen the same with the UN development system. Disabled people have been excluded from the development process by their own governments and now by the people who are supposed to stand by them! Who then should they turn to?

Obviously a few NGOs and even development partners are focusing on or including the disabled in their work. But how many are they against their overall percentage? A drop in the ocean!

It’s in recognition of this gap that the new UN treaty on disability rights has devoted a whole clause on the issue of international cooperation and development assistance. Article 32 on international cooperation says thus;

“States Parties recognize the importance of international cooperation and its promotion, in support of national efforts for the realization of the purpose and objectives of the present Convention, and will undertake appropriate and effective measures in this regard, between and among States and, as appropriate, in partnership with relevant international and regional organizations and civil society, in particular organizations of persons with disabilities. Such measures could include, inter alia:

(a) Ensuring that international cooperation, including international development programmes, is inclusive of and accessible to persons with disabilities;

(b) Facilitating and supporting capacity-building, including through the exchange and sharing of information, experiences, training programmes and best practices;

(c) Facilitating cooperation in research and access to scientific and technical knowledge;

(d) Providing, as appropriate, technical and economic assistance, including by facilitating access to and sharing of accessible and assistive technologies, and through the transfer of technologies.

2. The provisions of this article are without prejudice to the obligations of each State Party to fulfil its obligations under the present Convention.”

But in spite of these specific improvements, Africa and the world at large remains grossly unfair to people with disabilities. So much so that it is not unrealistic to compare the quality of life of a disabled person to that of a modern day slave.

In developing countries children with disabilities, especially disabled girls, are five times more likely to miss out on education compared to their non-disabled counterparts.

Many disabled people continue to miss out on education, training, and employment on account of their disability. A range of obstacles, institutional, social, economic and political, continue to relegate disabled people to the side-lines.

Governments, NGOs and development partners that all claim to support the poor and marginalized hardly ever mention people with disabilities in their budgets, programmes or monitoring plans. Disabled people are virtual orphans in the development system, ignored by the people who are supposed to care!

Even the UN is not innocent of these charges. It has made limited steps to actually improve the lives of disabled people, although it does continue to improve international policy and legislation on disability. In terms of developing real structures and resources to achieve the rights of disabled people though the UN has a long way to go.

However, it is not an impossible task. The UN has shown, in it’s response to the worldwide HIV/AIDS problem that affects close to 45 million people, that it can act quickly and effectively to tackle global issues. It established UNAIDS as a global

secretariat to coordinate international support on the issue, including specific in-country actions with regard to HIV/AIDS. It has also held summits with heads of states and governments to discuss the issue and actively work to combat the issue. Evidently, when it wants to it can act.

Why, therefore has it failed to act on disability? Does it not see disability as an important issue? Yet how can this be when over 650 million people worldwide are disabled, over ten times the number of people affected by HIV/AIDS? This is not playing down the impact of HIV/AIDS in the world and the importance of effective programmes to combat it, but it seems a valid question to ask considering the number of people living in poverty as a direct consequence of their disability.

How can the UN justify having specialized agencies and funds on almost every key global issue of today apart from disability? We regularly hear and read about the state of the world with regard to the environment, children, poverty and women, for example. But where is the report on the world's disabled people? Ignoring disabled people in this manner discriminates against them in a harsh and unjust way. Where is the fairness in that?

I wish to call on governments, development partners, civil society organizations, and the media and private sector players to commit themselves to focusing on disability. For them to subscribe to a new perspective that looks at persons with disabilities as human beings with full human rights, talents and potential.

This recognition and focus on disabled people is essential to ensure that the lives of disabled people around the world are improved and to enable them to contribute and play an active part in society. They should not be shunned and ignored by the world as is so often the case for disabled people today.

Communities and countries that have recognized this fact have scored highly on equity, social justice, governance and overall social economic development. We can all work to make this world a better place for everybody to call home. As the former French President Francois Mitterrand said, "If we buy into the illusion that we can make this world habitable for only a few, we will make it uninhabitable all together."

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