



International development, disability, and education: Towards a capabilities-focused discourse and praxis



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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study seeks to identify ways in which the international development community (IDC) can contribute to improved educational provision for young people with disabilities in low income countries. The discourse and praxis often adopted by IDC in this field are critiqued in the light of development realities and the principle that education systems should develop the diverse potentials of *all* students. It is concluded that IDC needs to adopt a new, 'capabilities-focused' discourse-praxis that is person-centred and context-sensitive – although it is acknowledged that there are significant obstacles to (as well as opportunities for) the adoption of this discourse-praxis.

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1. Introduction

Despite the pursuit of Education for All by national governments, civil society, and the international development community, the evidence shows that large numbers of young people in low income countries remain excluded from education systems, despite rising enrolment rates (Lewin and Sabates, 2011). Concern has also been expressed about the quality of the education received by young people enrolled in these systems (Tikly and Barrett, 2013). Young people with disabilities in low income countries are particularly educationally disadvantaged, as they tend to have lower enrolment, transition, and completion rates than their non-disabled peers, and, even if they complete a full course of education, their levels of attainment and achievement tend to be comparatively low (WHO [World Health Organisation] and World Bank, 2011). The evidence indicates that the educational situation for young people with disabilities is particularly bad in certain countries – for instance, fragile states (Trani et al., 2011), and that there are inequalities of educational provision within, as well as between, countries – for instance, between urban and rural areas (Mfum-Mensah, 2003; Serpell and Jere-Folotiya, 2011). Furthermore, certain groups of young people with disabilities are particularly educationally disadvantaged.

These groups include: girls and young women (Dhungana, 2006; Kiani, 2009), individuals with particular impairments and conditions (Braathen and Ingstad, 2006; Lynch et al., 2011a,b), and the children of the 'poorest of the poor' (WHO and World Bank, 2011). Young people with disabilities not only face a 'spectrum of disadvantage', but a 'continuum of disadvantage' as they experience educational exclusion and marginalisation throughout the education cycle from early childhood onwards (Lei and Myers, 2011). Educational exclusion and marginalisation prevent young people with disabilities from accumulating the various types of human capital which will enable them to lead successful adult lives (Singal et al., 2011). In particular, they often struggle to secure paid employment and become dependent on family-members who may themselves be struggling to earn a living (Wehbi and El-Yahib, 2007; Kwesi Kassah, 2008).

This paper seeks to identify ways in which the international development community (IDC) can effectively engage with the above situation. It is therefore a 'call to arms', as well as a multi-tiered analysis of development realities.

The paper begins by mapping *the organisational landscape of development, disability, and education* – i.e. identifying the various types of international development agency (IDA) working in this field and summarising their activities. It then describes *the challenges and opportunities of development contexts*. In the light of the above, the paper identifies the key elements of a *capabilities-focused discourse of development, disability, and education* – i.e. a conceptual framework which will enable IDC to understand and discuss issues related to the education of young people with

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disabilities in low income countries. It also identifies the key elements of a *capabilities-focused praxis of development, disability, and education* – i.e. a set of strategies and practices that will enable IDC to engage effectively with these development realities. Finally, the paper discusses *the various factors enabling and inhibiting the adoption of this discourse and praxis by IDC*. Although the paper focuses on the educational requirements of young people with disabilities, it is also acknowledged that the educational requirements of adults with disabilities require serious consideration (Groce and Bakhshi, 2011).

As the paper is an exploratory study, it develops rather than tests hypotheses. It is not grounded in a single piece of empirical research, but rather draws upon and interrogates a variety of texts, enabling wide-ranging, multi-layered analysis, and new syntheses. These texts not only include specific analyses of the work of IDC in the field of disability and education, but also analyses of the generic approaches adopted by IDC in all fields of activity. These texts not only describe the operations of IDAs, but also the ideologies shaping and the contexts facilitating and impeding their work. The texts not only consist of scholarly analyses of international development, but the ‘grey literature’ generated by these organisations – as this literature not only reveals the underlying assumptions and values of IDAs, but can provide valuable information about the work of IDAs. As well as drawing on documentary evidence, the paper draws upon the author’s 15 years’ experience in disability, education, and development, including four years working in Bangladesh supporting the government’s integrated education programme for children with visual impairments, six years working in Papua New Guinea as a university lecturer in special and inclusive education at a university, and three years working as the education advisor for Sightsavers. This paper can be compared with other, similarly exploratory studies of development, disability, and education (e.g. Opertti et al., 2009; Croft, 2010; Miles and Singal, 2010), but the paper is unique in one important respect – it seeks to place the work of IDC in this field within its multiple contexts and frameworks, something no previous study has attempted as far as the author is aware.

As well as being exploratory, the paper is normative as it seeks to identify both the right ends of development and the right means of achieving these ends. In this paper, the right ends are defined as the maximisation of the ‘capabilities’ of young people with disabilities in low income countries, combined with the provision of opportunities for these individuals to convert these capabilities into ‘functionings’ (see below). Sen, one of the principal architects of the ‘capabilities approach’ (CA), defines capabilities as “substantive freedoms” which provide people with the abilities to perform activities of value to them (2010, p. 253). People can then convert these capabilities into “realised functionings”, i.e. “what someone is actually able to do” (Sen, 2010, p. 75), unless they encounter various obstacles which inhibit or even prevent this conversion process. CA has evolved from, and is compatible with, human rights theory. However, in the field of international development, CA is preferable to rights-based approaches when these approaches are inflexible, overly-permeated with individualistic Western values, and are imposed from the ‘top down’. This is because CA, as described by Sen, is grounded in real-life situations and is therefore sensitive to the multiplicity, complexity, fluidity, and diversity of human needs (Robeyns, 2005; Clark, 2006; Unterhalter and Walker, 2007).

In his work, Sen discusses the means as well as the ends of capabilities-focused development. For Sen, development is an inclusive process, open to all and sensitive to “the plurality of different features of our lives and concerns” (Sen, 2010, p. 233). It is also a discursive process, characterised by both the free exchange of views and the genuine attempts by all participants to

understand one another’s position – a process therefore both enabling people to move beyond “positional confinement” (Sen, 2010, p. 155) and “enriching the informational basis of social choice” (p. 280). Third, it is a collaborative process in which participants are willing to come to “partial agreements” (Sen, 1999, p. 249) when “complete social unanimity” is impossible (p. 253). Fourth, it is an analytical process, characterised “by the discipline of subjecting one’s choices – of actions, as well as objectives, values, and priorities – to rational scrutiny” (Sen, 2002, p. 4). Finally, it is a dynamic process, subject to constant change and characterised by “evolutionary selection” (Sen, 1999, p. 273) – i.e. the emergence of appropriate policies and practices over extended periods of time. It has been argued that Sen’s theory of development is naively optimistic about the capacity of local agents and IDAs to work in the above ways. However, it has been counter-argued that these criticisms underestimate the capacity of various sets of stakeholders to engage in capabilities-focused development, and that Sen’s theory has in fact been operationalised in diverse contexts. See, for instance, Alkire (2005), Robeyns (2005), Clark (2006), Gray (2006) and Robeyns (2006).

Education is of central importance to CA as it provides “social opportunities . . . not only for the conduct of better lives” but “for more effective participation in economic and political activities” (Sen, 1999, p. 39). The educational requirements of people with disabilities in particular have also been addressed by scholars working in the field of CA. Nussbaum (2006), another of the principal architects of CA, has pointed out that people with disabilities sometimes require “atypical social arrangements, including varieties of care” (p. 99) if they are to achieve “an ample minimum for all the capabilities” (p. 178). And Unterhalter and Brighouse have criticised narrowly “resourcist” approaches which fail to recognise that many students with disabilities require additional levels and types of resources if they are to develop necessary capabilities and then convert these capabilities into functionings (2007, p. 75). The implications of CA, both for educational provision for young people with disabilities in low income countries and for the policies and practices of IDAs, will be the subject of this paper.

2. Mapping the organisational landscape

According to Sen, international development agencies (IDAs) can promote capabilities-focused development, as long as they adopt the right orientations and practices (Sen, 1984, 1999, 2002, 2010). In this section, I will endeavour to map the work of IDAs in this field. Unfortunately, this proved a problematic task for the author because there is often a significant disparity between the top-line claims of IDAs on their websites and their programmatic work, as Grimes and Bagree (2012) found when researching the work of the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) in this field. While some IDAs exaggerate the scale and significance of their work, others fail to publicise it adequately. For instance, CBM, a northern non-governmental organisation (NNGO), does not acknowledge on its website that it has significantly contributed to the establishment of a nationwide network of special education resource centres in Papua New Guinea (a fact previously known to the researcher). Even when the researcher was able to unearth programme information on organisational websites, this information was often dryly quantitative, scanty, or patchy, as Grimes and Bagree again found when researching DFID. Alternative sources of information on the work of IDAs in disability and development – for instance, academic studies of their work in this field – are few and far between.

Multilaterals working in the field of disability and education include the World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO, and the European

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