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# The reality of disability: Multidimensional poverty of people with disability and their families in Latin America

Mónica Pinilla-Roncancio\*

School of Medicine, Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Carrera 7 N 116-05, Colombia

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Disability and poverty are interconnected and although this relationship has been recognised, there is a lack of empirical evidence to support any possible causal relationship in this topic, particularly in the context of Latin America (LA).

**Hypothesis:** This study tests the hypothesis “Disability increases the risk of multidimensional poverty of people living with disabilities and their families”.

**Methods:** Using national census data from Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica and Mexico, the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (Global MPI) was calculated with the aim of measuring and comparing the levels of multidimensional poverty of people living in households with and without disabled members in the five countries.

**Results:** We found that in the five countries people with disabilities and their families had higher incidence, intensity and levels of multidimensional poverty compared with people living in other households. Their levels of deprivation were also higher for all the indicators included in the Global MPI and the contribution of this group to the national MPI was higher than their share of the population, thus people with disabilities and their families are overrepresented in those living in multidimensional poverty.

**Conclusions:** People with disabilities and their families are in worse conditions than poor households without disabled members and social policies should aim to reduce their high levels of multidimensional poverty and deprivation.

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## 1. Introduction

Disability and poverty are concomitant conditions. The cyclical relationship between these two conditions has been recognised globally, with disability increasing the risks of becoming poor and poverty increasing the risk of becoming a person with disability.<sup>1</sup> The number of studies analysing this relationship has increased in the last two decades,<sup>2–5</sup> and roles played by exclusion and discrimination have been recognised in the literature.<sup>5</sup>

In the last decades, the understanding of poverty from a multidimensional perspective has developed and been widely acknowledged. From this perspective, poverty is understood as a *capability failure* that limits the opportunities a person has, in order to choose the life s/he values to live.<sup>6,7</sup> In addition, the definition of disability has also changed. Currently, disability is widely

understood as the result of the interaction between an impairment and different environmental factors, which act as barriers for the social inclusion of a person living with impairments.<sup>8</sup>

In recent years, disability has gain a major recognition. The Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)<sup>9</sup> recognises and protects the human rights of people with disabilities (PwD). Signatory states should protect the rights of this group and socially include them, eliminating all sources of exclusion and discrimination. Additionally, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have recognised the importance of “*leaving no one behind*”, including PwD,<sup>10</sup> mentioning PwD in seven goals and recognising them as a vulnerable group.<sup>11</sup>

Under the context of the SDGs and the CRPD, there is a need to understand the characteristics and needs of PwD around the world and in each country. This information will allow the appropriate design and implementation of social policies and programmes to guarantee the protection of their human rights and also to fulfil the SDGs.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [mv.pinilla@uniandes.edu.co](mailto:mv.pinilla@uniandes.edu.co), [Monica\\_2581@hotmail.com](mailto:Monica_2581@hotmail.com).

Disability is a complex situation that not only affects individuals, but also his/her families.<sup>12</sup> It reduces individuals and families available income,<sup>13,14</sup> and it affects the available opportunities that PwD and their families have access to, for example, a person living with disabilities usually faces barriers when wishing to access to education, a factor which reduces his/her chances of participating in the labour market or being employed. All this has negative consequences in the short and long run and increases their vulnerability to poverty.<sup>5,15</sup> Given the complexity of the situation, indirect measures of poverty, such as income or consumption, do not capture the full effect of disability on the levels of poverty and wellbeing of individuals and their families.<sup>6,16</sup> In addition, indirect measures tend to ignore the role that exclusion and discrimination from education, employment and social participation play in the creation of the cycle between disability and poverty.<sup>5</sup> These measures also do not account for the indirect effect that disability has on the reduction of household income. For example, when another household member assumes the care of a PwD, this reduces the total level of paid employment that family members engage in and has a direct effect on the final available income of the family.<sup>16</sup>

Research analysing the existence of a relationship between disability and poverty has aimed to describe the socioeconomic characteristics of PwD<sup>1–3,17</sup> and to determine the extra income that PwD need to cover the extra costs of disability.<sup>13,14,18</sup> In the last few years, studies analysing the levels of multidimensional poverty of PwD have increased.<sup>3,19–22</sup> Evidence provided by these studies reveals that PwD, no matter their age, face significantly higher levels deprivation and multidimensional poverty and the situation is worse for women and girls with disabilities, especially living in rural areas.<sup>4</sup> Empirical evidence on this situation in Latin America (LA) is limited, with most studies solely describing the characteristics of PwD.<sup>23–30</sup> However, Mitra et al (2013)<sup>3</sup> and Pinilla-Roncancio & Alkire (2017)<sup>22</sup> included information from LA countries in their analysis. Their results suggest that PwD in LA face higher levels of multidimensional poverty and deprivation compared with other groups.

This is the first study analysing data exclusively from LA countries and studies the levels of multidimensional poverty of PwD and their families. Given the lack of empirical evidence on this field (regionally and globally), the findings presented here provide an important contribution to the literature in the analysis of the relationship between disability and poverty and, more importantly, to the literature on global poverty. Identifying which factors contribute the most to the levels of multidimensional poverty of PwD will directly benefit social policies. In the context of LA, findings from this study might support national and regional strategies to reduce multidimensional poverty.

## 2. Data and methods

### 2.1. Selection of the cases

LA countries present different levels of human, social and economic development. With the aim to compare the levels of multidimensional poverty between individuals living in households with and without members with disability in LA, five countries were selected following a small-N comparative variable-oriented design using most-different cases.<sup>31–33</sup> Studies following this design assume that country characteristics at the macro level do not influence the results at the micro level. In the case of this study, this means that levels of multidimensional poverty of PwD and their families should follow similar patterns no matter the characteristics of the countries where those are analysed.

Given data constraints, countries were selected first depending on the availability of questions on disability in their population and

household censuses. Then, countries were selected using four major criteria: classification of the country based on the development of their social security system; severity of the implementation of neoliberal reforms; level of human development and countries' history of dictatorship. At the end of the process, five countries were selected: Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica and Mexico (Table 1). Those countries have similar levels of human development and expansion of their social security system. However, the severity of the implementation of neoliberal reforms and levels of democracy in the last decades are different. Using this method of selection, it is possible to conclude that if levels of multidimensional poverty of PwD and their families follow similar patterns in the five countries, even when countries were not similar, those similarities may be associated with the presence of disability in the household (variable of analysis).

### 2.2. Data sources

The last available population census in each country was used as source of information: Brazil (2010), Chile (2001), Colombia (2005), Costa Rica (2011) and Mexico (2010). In the five countries, questions on disability aimed to identify individuals with different types of impairments and were similar to questions proposed by the Washington Group on Disability Statistics (WG) (Appendix A1).

Data from Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica and Mexico was downloaded from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series International (IPUMS- International). In the case of Brazil, data was obtained via the National Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE: Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística). Each sample constituted 10% of the population of each country.

### 2.3. Definition of disability

Although all countries included questions on disability, the five countries used a different list of impairments (Appendix A1). Only Brazil considered a severity scale as part of the questions to identify persons with disability. In this context, a PwD was defined as a person who referred having any type of impairment, or in the case of Brazil, a person who referred to live with a severe or moderate difficulty. It is acknowledge that when a severity scale is not used, persons referring living with an impairment usually represent the most severe cases of disability.<sup>34</sup>

### 2.4. Methods

Following the methodology proposed by Alkire and Foster<sup>35</sup> (A-F method), the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (Global MPI) was used to measure the levels of multidimensional poverty of PwD and their families.

The Global MPI measures acute multidimensional poverty and has been included in the Human Development Report (HDR) since 2010. The unit of identification of poverty and deprivation is the household, assuming that individual deprivations are distributed equally among all household members. It has three dimensions: education, health and living standards and 10 indicators. Currently the HDR presents the results of the calculations of more than 100 countries around the world.

Given that LA countries have higher levels of social and economic development,<sup>36</sup> some deprivation cutoffs were adapted. Those included years of schooling and asset ownership. In addition, because of data limitations it was not possible to calculate the indicator on *floor materials*, instead an indicator measuring deprivation in *walls materials* was used.

The Global MPI assigns the same weight to each dimension (1/3), and the same relative weight to each indicator inside a

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