

Equalise It !

A Manifesto for Disability Equality in Development Cooperation

This manifesto has been written to identify the issues for the disability movement, clarify any confusion there may be for disability and development professionals and set out a programme for change in order to create real equality for disabled people and our democratic, representative organisations (DPOs) in the development process. The adoption of the UN Convention on the rights of People with Disabilities by a growing number of countries makes the implementation of the principles in this manifesto a matter of urgency.

Disability, Poverty and Development Charities.

As disabled people....

Throughout the world we face discrimination.
Throughout the world we are socially excluded.
Throughout the world we cannot get equal access or any access at all to education, employment or decent health care.
Throughout the world we are ignored in development programmes
And so...

Throughout the world we, disabled people, remain the poorest of the poor!

The fact of this poverty has been used by global development charities to raise millions of dollars both from the public and from development agencies. However, only a small proportion of this money ever filters down to us or our organisations. Even a smaller proportion ever succeeds in effecting sustained improvement in our lives.

At the same time we often have little or no control over what is being done 'to us' 'for us' or 'on our behalf.' There tends, therefore, to be little agreement between what many non-disabled

professionals and charities think disabled people need and what we actually want. As a consequence, development projects can leave behind little but disappointment. Because of this the big charities are frequently seen by disabled people as part of the problem, not part of the solution. Nonetheless, disabled people in the South and Southern DPOs have had little choice but to continue working with them and to smile while doing it. **The charities have access to the money and with that comes power and control.**

These charities retain control because they are corporate organisations alive to a new funding environment which is demanding that boxes are ticked for such things as ‘human rights’, ‘inclusion’ and ‘listening to the voice of disabled people.’ They have all ticked the boxes, adopted the appropriate language and changed their public image. This is part of their corporate funding strategy. However, the reality is that their operations have not changed very much at all. They continue to be managed by non-disabled people and employ few, if any disabled people.

This reality on the ground is that for us, especially in the South, non-disabled professionals from the North continue to come and to go. Projects come and projects go. Through this never-ending process the charities go from strength to strength, **while our DPOs continue to live from hand to mouth.**

This manifesto sets out how to begin to overturn this situation and the unequal power relations which feed it.

“Nothing About Us Without Us”

“Nothing About Us Without Us” was the slogan adopted by Disabled Peoples’ International (DPI) at its founding in 1981. DPI was established after Rehabilitation International (RI), then the world’s leading disability charity, refused to permit adequate representation by disabled people. This slogan has been particularly effective in capturing a key idea of our struggle for human rights - **self determination is essential for achieving true equality.**

This was clearly acknowledged in the 1993 UN Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities. Rule 18 says, *“States should recognise the rights of persons with*

disabilities to represent persons with disabilities at national, regional and local levels. States should also recognise the advisory role of organisations of persons with disabilities in decision-making on disability matters”.

“Nothing About Us Without Us” is also in line with the more general human rights approach to development cooperation. For example the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) holds that *“The human rights approach to development means empowering people to take their own decisions, rather than being the passive objects of choices made on their behalf.”*

The ideas of self-determination and human rights developed and fought for by us in our international disability movement and encapsulated in “Nothing About Us Without Us” are also at the very heart of the new **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**.

Disability - a Human Rights Issue

UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognises that *‘disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.’*

[http:// www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable)

There are eight guiding principles that underlie the Convention and each one of its specific articles:

1. Respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy including the freedom to make one’s own choices, and independence of person
2. Non-discrimination
3. Full and effective participation and inclusion in society
4. Respect for difference and acceptance of disabled people as part of human diversity and humanity
5. Equality of opportunity
6. Accessibility
7. Equality between men and women
8. Respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities and respect for the right of children with disabilities to preserve their identities.

In particular the Convention emphasises the importance of self-representation through DPOs and commits State Parties to working “in partnership with relevant international and regional organizations and civil society, *in particular organizations of persons with disabilities*” (Article 32).

**The Office of the United Nation High Commissioner for
Human Rights**

**Four core values of human rights law that are of
particular importance in the context of disability.**

- the dignity of each individual, who is deemed to be of inestimable value because of his/her inherent self-worth, and not because s/he is economically or otherwise “useful”;
- the concept of autonomy or self-determination, which is based on the presumption of a capacity for self-directed action and behaviour, and requires that the person be placed at the centre of all decisions affecting him/her;
- the inherent equality of all regardless of difference;
- and the ethic of solidarity, which requires society to sustain the freedom of the person with appropriate social supports.

<http://www.ohchr.org/english/issues/disability/intro.htm#human>

As participation is a legal right which we can claim, it is the duty of states and society to ensure that right. Our participation and inclusion must not only be in the systems, structures and services of society, but in the policy-making process as well.

As can be seen, the UN Convention calls for disabled people and our organisations to be in the driving seat. However, this will not happen unless there is a fundamental change in the unequal, neo-colonial relationship which currently exists between disabled people and the large corporate charities, government agencies and international development institutions.

It seems clear that at this phase of our struggle for equality and human rights “Nothing About Us Without Us” is no longer enough. As disabled people we and our organisations need not only to be included, we need to assume the leading role.

Professionals On Tap, Not On Top

Some time ago, David Werner, one of the founders of the Projimo Project in Mexico, wrote:

Women in most countries are now demanding their right to leadership in the institutions that represent their concerns. It is high time for disabled people everywhere to make similar demands. It is time for planners and administrators to provide the necessary opportunity, encouragement and appropriate skills training.

*And, most urgently of all, it is time for non-disabled professionals to recognise the right of disabled persons to self control, and therefore to gracefully step to one side, into a role where they, as **professionals, are no longer on top but rather on tap - as allies.***

This was an attempt to understand the real relationship between disabled people and non-disabled professionals and to alter it. Redefining the relationship is an essential step to achieving a human rights based, empowering and emancipatory approach to disability and development. Without it we will remain no more than the passive raw material for international and national NGOs.

It doesn't have to be this way. As with other social movements such as black power in the USA, women's equality or the anti-imperialist struggles, as disabled people we must assume real leadership in our own liberation. We must fight to realise the promise of the UN Convention. And, those non-disabled

professionals who want to help need to move over and accept a new, more appropriate and equitable relationship. They need to be on tap, not on top. They need to become our genuine allies.

A Check List for Allies

To become genuine allies in the liberation of disabled people funders, INGOs and other intermediaries must take steps to transform themselves and how they operate. Among other things, they need to:

- Ensure that the need for programmes and policies are identified by disabled people and that we are not included simply to legitimise funding applications.
- Ensure that disabled people are involved in all areas of the programme, not just as recipients, and preferably through our own democratically run organisations (DPOs).
- Ensure programmes are committed at every stage to full human rights and equality of opportunity.
- Ensure that resources are transferred to DPOs in order to build capacity and sustainability.
- Empower and resource disabled people to represent ourselves through our own organisations.
- Champion disabled leadership both inside and outside the charities.
- Be prepared to change their external policies and practices through engaging with the authentic voice of disabled people in the North and South.
- Reform their governance, staffing and operations structures to move towards disabled people being in the majority positions at all levels of the organisation.

The signatories to this manifesto are ready and willing to work with, support and assist any organisation that wishes to travel this

road with disabled people. At the same time we will continue to challenge those who ignore our legitimate demands for control of our own destiny.

