

15 Conclusion

Humanitarian and development organisations such as Oxfam expend a lot of hard work and money on supporting vulnerable, marginalised people to survive and make positive changes in their lives. What could this mean in practice for disabled people, if organisations learned consistently to apply a disability-rights perspective to their work? What positive changes would be achieved by ensuring that all our work was informed by an awareness of the needs and potential contributions of disabled people?

When put into practice in the contexts of humanitarian relief and development work, the impact of Disability Equality is illustrated by examples like the following:

- The young woman who used to say ‘better dead than disabled’, but who developed enough confidence in herself and her considerable abilities to help other disabled people (and their non-disabled relatives) to survive the war and winter in Kosovo, distributing supplies of aid and tracing the displaced.
- The smart and eloquent man with a speech impairment, made to feel embarrassed and used to keeping quiet, who now shares his ideas and knowledge with others, gives public speeches, chairs meetings, challenges misconceptions, and is a role model for disabled children.
- An emergency-relief programme which acknowledges the existence of disabled people and actively seeks to protect their rights and provide for their needs, on a par with its support for non-disabled people.
- Thousands of disabled people in Uganda elected to every type of decision-making body, from village council to national parliament.
- A workshop on NGO management which brings together disabled women from a disability organisation and non-disabled women from a women’s organisation to work together on matters of shared interest. They have never interacted before, and the disabled women have never before been invited to be involved in anything that is not specifically about disability. The women learn about and from each other, and go beyond any initial barriers. They make plans for future work together, and create networks and friendships.
- The development of programmes which aim for this type of impact, even though that impact may be hard to quantify and present in neat, statistical form.
- A report from Afrim, a member of a DPO in Pristina: ‘Our group had a party, and one guy came who for eight years hadn’t even wanted to go out on the balcony of his house. Now he comes to the community centre twice a week, asking what else he can do.’

Experience shows that people will not make lasting change in their lives unless they believe in themselves and their ability. Disabled people, like other oppressed groups, have an extra obstacle to overcome to reach the starting point of self-belief. Many have endured a lifetime of being made to feel useless, inadequate, and inferior.

That is why for many disabled people discovering the disability-rights movement is a life-changing experience. The idea of Disability Equality offers a completely different way of thinking about being disabled and about one's place in the world. Disabled people are no longer the problem, but the solution. One of the major impacts of Disability Equality is to make people feel good about themselves, and 'if people feel good about themselves, they can start to create change' (B. Venkatesh).

Disability Equality is a powerful tool, one which helps people to move from shame to pride, from passivity and dependence to activism and action. Myrvete from Kosovo sums it up: 'Learning about the human rights of disabled people ... we began to recognise the existence of barriers, but above all we began to realise that it is possible to break down those barriers ... we are the ones who have to create that environment [of equality]; we can't wait for others to do things for us.'

For non-disabled people, Disability Equality is no less rewarding. Most do not consciously seek to discriminate against others, and they find that learning how not to discriminate is liberating. It can change how disabled and non-disabled people relate to each other, opening up a space where genuine emotions of all kinds can flourish. You like or dislike someone for who they really are. You are liked or disliked for who you really are. Pity, fear, and other misplaced emotions, which can distort the reactions of non-disabled people to disabled people, are replaced by a willingness to learn, share, and co-operate on an equal basis.

As we have seen, attitudes and actions are closely linked. In the Disability Equality movement, the focus is not on lofty ideals, but on practical action. Whether we are disabled or not, dealing with our attitudes and emotions needs to be recognised as the starting point for action. Disability Equality helps the transition from attitude to action, because it shows what has to be done to overcome the 'problem' of disability: modify our physical environment; introduce transport and communication systems that work for everyone, not just part of the population; provide opportunities and resources for the equal participation of disabled and non-disabled members of our families and communities, at work, at school, and in legal, social, and political spheres.

Awareness of Disability Equality and the implementation of its principles can bring significant results in the disaster-relief context, where the overwhelming majority of workers and decision makers are (still) non-disabled. Disability Equality leads to decisions that are based on respect for all individuals, recognising their worth and dignity, and to actions which meet different people's basic needs in a variety of appropriate ways. This approach is more likely to save lives at risk than a 'survival-of-the-fittest' or 'one-size-fits-all' approach. Everybody gains if staff involved in water and sanitation provision, construction, medical care, public health, logistics, and distribution are given the opportunity to make their programmes inclusive.

Often the changes that need to be made in order to make Disability Equality a reality are simple and inexpensive. Sometimes they are not, but that is no justification for not making them. On a daily basis society spends millions of dollars on meeting the rights, needs, and wishes of its non-disabled citizens, without the slightest hesitation. The cost of being non-disabled is very high, but it is rare to hear anyone complain about it, or refuse to spend money because of it.

To conclude, Disability Equality helps disabled professionals and activists to reach out to their isolated brothers and sisters, those who feel themselves to be beyond hope. It helps emergency and development staff to reach in appropriate, effective ways the most marginalised and vulnerable within any marginalised group, be they disabled 'Untouchables', disabled street children, disabled flood survivors, or disabled refugees.

Putting Disability Equality into action saves lives that would otherwise have been lost, and changes lives that would otherwise have had little chance of change.