Beyond identity: unlocking the potential of intersectionality

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Introduction

There is increasing recognition that structural barriers and rights violations faced by people with disabilities must be addressed for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved. However, current efforts often focus on distinct identities, forcing resources and perspectives into discrete categories such as gender, disability, or the broader catch-all 'social inclusion'. This ignores the complexity of intersecting experiences of privilege and disadvantage. When gender is the lens, then people with disabilities are often overlooked. When disability is the lens, then women, gender diverse people, and ethnic minorities are overlooked. Such siloed approaches, where one lens takes precedence over others, risks excluding those most marginalised from development processes.

Intersectionality is a way of understanding how different forms of discrimination – such as those based on gender, disability, class, or race – overlap and interact to shape experiences of inequality and injustice. The resulting impacts are often more complex than those of a single form of discrimination experienced in isolation. It reflects what marginalised communities have always known: experiences of discrimination are intertwined and cannot be neatly categorised, because people's lives are not lived like that.[v]

Intersectionality is gaining traction within disability inclusive international development. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities explicitly recognises 'multiple forms of discrimination' faced by people with disabilities.[vi] While yet to be consistently conceptualised or applied in practice, key elements of an intersectional approach include:

1. identifying the underlying causes of various forms of discrimination in a given context (such as ableism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, colonialism, racism, sexism)

2. considering how these intersect to create privilege and disadvantage for different people

3. centring development processes and outcomes on the experiences, needs, and interests of people who are most marginalised and disadvantaged, and

4. prompting critical thinking and reflection around individuals and organisations' relationships to power and privilege, and whether they are upholding or challenging the status quo.

An intersectional approach helps to illuminate the rights of all people with disabilities, aligning with the SDGs' commitment to 'leave no one behind' by ensuring equal rights and inclusive development for the most marginalised.

Challenges and opportunities

Intersectionality is over-theorised and treated largely as a technical approach

Intersectionality is frequently perceived as overly theoretical, and its application in development practice tends to be top-down and bureaucratic, diluting its transformative potential. Narrow, quantifiable indicators for measuring development outcomes tend to frame inequalities as discrete technical problems. This diverts focus away from the systems that produce and maintain inequalities. Used properly, intersectionality is a powerful analytical and advocacy tool, especially for those with lived experience. It can be used to hold institutions accountable by exposing structural discrimination and the limitations of one-size-fits-all approaches. Bridging theory and practice is essential to keep intersectional approaches robust and uncompromised by 'indicator culture'.[vii]

Need to move beyond 'intersecting identities'

Intersectionality is often understood only in terms of multiple intersecting identities. Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term, notes that many applications of intersectionality simply multiply identity categories rather than provide structural analysis.[viii] This focus on identity can lead to prioritising one group's experience of marginalisation over others, hindering collective movement building and equal outcomes. A more holistic conceptualisation of intersectionality should look beyond identity categories to recognise and critique interconnected systems of privilege and disadvantage to better illuminate the necessary interventions for transformative change.

Lived-experience as the starting point for understanding intersectional discrimination

With few exceptions, development actors have generally failed to engage sufficiently with people experiencing intersectional discrimination to understand how they would define it for themselves. Like early definitions of disability, where rehabilitation and medical experts dominated discourse until people with disabilities began to lead the discussion, intersectionality presents an opportunity for development actors to learn from those affected by intersectional discrimination. This perspective shift is crucial for developing credible intersectional approaches that challenge the dominance of Western ideas over traditional and Indigenous knowledge. Addressing this power dynamic allows for more inclusive development, enabling marginalised communities to shape their own narratives and drive meaningful change.

Rights-based approaches need to be specified and integrated

An intersectional approach is not a panacea for all challenges within disability inclusive development. It must be implemented in conjunction with a rights-based approach, grounded in the general principles and full articles of the CRPD. By connecting human rights to the various forms of discrimination that people with disabilities experience, and paying attention to specific measures, we ensure equality and non-discrimination for all.

Principles to enable intersectionality in practice

Tools such as UN Women's Intersectionality Toolkit are available to support the application of intersectionality in development and human rights programming. This toolkit provides guidance and

a set of core enablers to help explore who is left behind, why, and in what circumstances, supporting development actors to better incorporate an intersectional approach and identify key gaps and opportunities in their work.[ix]

1. Self-reflection (reflexivity)

We (as individuals and as part of organisations) all bring our own perspectives, biases, and assumptions to our work and this may play a role in perpetuating discrimination. It's important to always interrogate this and consider how this may influence how you engage with others and how you frame social issues. Reflect on what other perspectives there might be, who might be excluded from sharing their experiences, and what you can do to address this and enable others.

2. Dignity, choice and autonomy

Respect and uphold the dignity, choice, and autonomy of all people. This cannot be assumed, and decisions and perspectives should not be made on behalf of another person. Consider who does (and does not) have independence, full control over how they live their life, and the opportunity to directly share their experiences, rather than having someone speak on their behalf.

3. Power and relational power

Consider who holds power, who makes decisions, who is oppressed, and in what circumstances. Make sure you consider your own role and relationship to the way power is held and enforced, for example when engaging with organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs). Reflect on how those in power may or may not be held accountable.

4. Diverse knowledges

International development often favours Western academic and scientific knowledge over other forms. It is crucial to prioritise and learn from people with diverse knowledge and experiences who are typically excluded from 'expert' roles. Incorporating local and traditional knowledge and practice can significantly strengthen community-based supports for people with disabilities, especially in areas like support services and deinstitutionalisation.

5. Transformative and rights based

An intersectional approach should be transformative and rights-based, aiming to go beyond mainstreaming by addressing inequalities in resources, relationships, and social structures. Intersectionality brings attention to overlaps in these systems, such as how social norms and stigma interact to limit access to education for children disadvantaged on the basis of disability, gender, and ethnicity.

6. Time and space

It is important to reflect on how privilege and discrimination are experienced in the specific context and location you are working in as this shifts over time and is influenced by social positioning and location. For instance, gender discrimination varies across generations, and experiences of racism differ between countries. Similarly, understandings of disability have also shifted from a medical model to human rights model.

7. Accessibility and reasonable accommodation

Accessibility and reasonable accommodation are critical for intersectionality. This includes budget, asking people what they need for full participation, and addressing physical, social, transportation, information, and communication barriers. Language translation, sign language interpretation, closed captioning, braille, easy-to-read formats, child-friendly and hybrid consultation methods are all considerations.

8. Intersecting identities

This prompts us to understand who is most marginalised, within already marginalised groups, learn about the intersecting and unique systems of discrimination and barriers they face, and centre their perspectives and priorities in a program or context. Remember that not all identities are visible or safe to disclose in some settings for marginalised individuals, and collection and analysis of intersectional data must prioritise adherence to rights-based principles.[x]

Looking ahead to 2030

By harnessing the above enablers and unlocking the potential of intersectionality for international development, practitioners can actively work towards equitable outcomes for all. Intentional strategies to progress this include:

Capacity development for donor staff

Transformative change requires capacity development on intersectionality with a focus on self-reflection, building relationships of trust, and understanding contexts. The focus should be first on cultivating a mindset where attitudes and ways of working are challenged, and subsequently on applying intersectional enablers throughout existing work processes at a policy, programmatic, or institutional level.

Shifting power through transformative approaches to engagement

Intersectionality requires transformative engagement processes, with the most marginalised actively framing social issues and shaping policy, research, and programs. This involves finding new ways to seek, listen, and learn from those experiencing intersectional discrimination, as well as 'turning the lens inwards', acknowledging our own roles as development practitioners in perpetuating power imbalance. Peer-to-peer consultations facilitated by trusted entities like OPDs can mitigate risks from unequal power dynamics between donor agencies and people with disabilities. Emphasising strengths-based approaches and avoiding tokenistic representation can further enhance the process.

Dedicating resources, time, and valuing expertise as part of intersectional GEDSI analysis

An intersectional approach to gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) analysis is needed to map the barriers, experiences and priorities of those facing intersectional discrimination. This analysis must actively seek out and be informed by diverse and marginalised perspectives. This requires dedicated time and financial resources, including budget for accessibility and reasonable accommodation and adequate compensation for lived experience expertise. In the context of intersectional discrimination, it is crucial to allocate sufficient time to foster trust and create safety within development processes.

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[v] Crenshaw K. 2015. Why Intersectionality Can't Wait, Washington Post, September 24, 2015.

[vi] 'Intersectional discrimination' is further defined in Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. 2018. General comment No.6 on equality and non-discrimination. https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no6-equality-and-non-discrimination

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[viii] Berger M T and Guidroz K. 2009. A conversation with founding scholars of intersectionality Kimberlé Crenshaw, Nira Yuval- Davis, and Michelle Fine. The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy through Race, Class, & Gender. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.

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x UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2018. A Human Rights Based Approach to Data - Leaving No One Behind in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/tools-and-resources/human-rights-based-approach-data-leaving-no-one-behind-2030-agenda