



WORLD INSTITUTE ON DISABILITY

3075 Adeline Street • Suite 155 • Berkeley, CA 94703-2545 • <http://www.wid.org>
TELEPHONE: 510-225-6400 • FAX: 510-225-0477

The Involvement of Persons with Disabilities in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding Efforts: Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (PWD) as Part of the Solution in the Post-Conflict Arena

Published: August, 2014

Revised: February, 2015

By: World Institute on Disability

Summary

Violent conflict and war are widespread worldwide, and they have a disproportionate impact on people with disabilities in a multitude of ways. According to the World Health Organization, in 2004 there were 1.15 billion people with disabilities worldwide (http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/report.pdf); and the Center for Disability Studies (2010) has estimated that approximately 16% of all disabilities are war and conflict related. Many wars are low intensity conflicts which serve to disable people rather than to kill them. Through a number of factors, conflict situations also contribute to extreme mental, emotional, and physical harm to individuals with disabilities (acquired through conflict or otherwise), their families and the community at large. These harms and their reverberations can last for decades, causing further stress between groups.

After cessation of hostilities, there are often peacebuilding efforts between a given conflict's stakeholders. In 2007, the UN Secretary-General's Policy Committee defined peacebuilding as follows:

"Peacebuilding involves a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development. Peacebuilding strategies must be coherent and tailored to specific needs of the country concerned, based on national ownership, and should comprise a carefully prioritized, sequenced, and therefore relatively narrow set of activities aimed at achieving the above objectives."

For a number of reasons, people with disabilities should be brought into greater peace building processes. These include issues around human rights, justice, fairness, and ensuring a comprehensive and long-lasting peace. However, people with disabilities are largely excluded from peace building efforts - often through direct prejudice, a lack of recognizing people with disabilities as a distinct stakeholder group, discarding the need to identify or incorporate their unique concerns, or the general

invisibility of people with disabilities in certain conflict areas.

Based on a related research literature review and 18 years of cross-listed academic courses from major universities, it is abundantly clear that very little literature has been written that addresses persons with disabilities and peacebuilding. Only a single case study conducted by Pearl Praise Gottschalk (2007) examined the experiences of persons disabled by war in the peacebuilding process in Sierra Leone. Here we work to expand that discussion. This paper provides an overview of how and why people with disabilities (PWD) should be included in the conflict resolution and peace building process after violent conflict.

About the Authors

The co-authors of this paper are Anita Aaron, Bruce Curtis and Alex Ghenis, World Institute on Disability (WID), and USIP's staff Danielle Lane and Ariana Barth. The information draws from literature research conducted by USIP and WID, discussions with subject matter experts in the international disability community, and interviews with USIP's staff who have practical field experience working in post-conflict countries.

Challenges

A salient feature of the literature and case studies review is that of major challenges, including, but not limited to:

- Nearly all stakeholders in peacebuilding processes currently see the disabled community as a homogenous group (i.e. as having mobility impairments). This can lead to insufficient recognition of the breadth of experiences of people with disabilities and, consequently, exploration of necessary peacebuilding actions to address their needs.
- Policy implementation is currently inadequate at all levels, in part due to cultural norms and current societal structures. This is why much of the literature stresses the importance of community-based and holistic approaches to inclusion.
- There is a policy divide that separates those disabled as a result of conflict (injuries, malnutrition-related, etc.) and those with disabilities acquired through other means (congenital, degenerative, accidental etc.) irrespective of timeframe (pre-conflict, during conflict itself, or after hostilities stop). This is particularly detrimental with regards to the allocation of resources in the post-conflict legislative and development processes.
- There are organizational and logistical barriers to getting persons with disabilities “to the peacebuilding table” - not only physically (i.e. through transportation or accessible meeting spaces), but also symbolically (as recognized & respected contributors).
- Research indicates that, in many cases, assorted disabled populations are rarely self-represented in peacebuilding processes. For example, urban representatives may have different needs and concerns from non-urban disabled populations – yet both groups might share one representative, if they are represented at all. And those representatives may not even be members of the local disability community, but rather “disability experts” from sympathetic organizations or agencies.
- Group expectations for peacebuilding efforts are unrealistic in many cases. Even when represented at the table, many vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, are not prepared or able to advocate, negotiate, debate, and represent themselves to their greatest

advantage, often as a result of existing structural inequalities (i.e. a lack of education or prior inclusion in official proceedings). Strong advocacy may still yield less-than-ideal outcomes for a number of reasons, such as poor recognition from other stakeholders or insufficient resources.

Case Study: Pearl Praise Gottschalk *“How Are We in This World Now?”: Examining the Experiences of Persons Disabled by War in the Peace Processes of Sierra Leone* (2007)

Through our research, we were only able to identify one case study addressing the inclusion of people with disabilities in peace building efforts. The study, conducted in 2007, consisted of interviews with 10 experts in the peace building process following the Civil War in Sierra Leone, which lasted from 1991-2002, and conversations with around 100 people with disabilities throughout the country. It explored the experience of people with disabilities in several post-conflict peace building efforts including a Truth and Reconciliation Commission; a Special Court for war crimes; and Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration proceedings. A focus was put on those disabled during war because of their unique relationship with the impacts of conflict, and also because it allowed for relatively focused research.

The findings and lessons learned from this study are highly relevant for understanding existing experiences and issues for people with disabilities, identifying areas to focus on in future peacebuilding efforts, and designing further case studies.

The study explored several aspects of the participants’ experiences in the Civil War and peace building processes. Its main findings were as follows:

1. *Inclusion and Participation in Decision Making*

People with disabilities had an assortment of experiences in the various post-conflict proceedings. Namely, they were initially included in elections but did not feel that their needs were addressed, which discouraged future voting. They were somewhat included in Truth and Reconciliation Commission proceedings, but were not consulted in its overall organization so saw underwhelming results. They likewise saw underwhelming results in the Special Court, and also feared retaliation from those being prosecuted if they were to testify. Finally, there was very little representation by people with disabilities in Peace Conferences.

2. *Utilizing Unique Initiatives*

The participants often noted that their ideas for unique or innovative peace building initiatives were not valued or utilized - which reflected their frequent treatment as second-class citizens. Instead, they felt as if outside organizations came in with preconceived peace building prescriptions and people with disabilities were simply brought into those processes. When local groups attempted grassroots initiatives, they generally couldn’t get funding from official channels or international organizations, stifling their efforts.

3. *Justice Unfulfilled*

The researchers explored justice in two forms: retribution towards perpetrators of violence, and public acknowledgment of victims’ suffering through reparations. Many participants expressed negative feelings about the Special Court, which was used to try war criminals. They perceived that the Court actually provided high-quality housing and medical care to perpetrators of violence, which contrasted with the poor living conditions of victims; and meanwhile made negligible efforts to provide reparations to victims (namely, “the Court held a Victims Commemoration Day and pledged U.S. \$20,000 toward public outreach forums, amputee sports and other initiatives for persons disabled by war,” but no direct assistance). With regards to the national government, people with disabilities did not receive any reparations for crimes

committed during or after war. When they were treated poorly (with discriminatory treatment or outright violence), the police did not investigate or required bribes to do so. The government sometimes exacerbated their hardships through, for example, seizing land for the construction of schools without any compensation. Some interviewees were disillusioned with the prospect of justice, but almost all stated that it was “a very important issue for them.”

4. *Recognizing the Unintended Consequences of Peace Building*

There were multiple dynamics of the peace building process that left people with disabilities with feelings of envy and jealousy, as well as frustration with the lack of effective reparations. With regards to envy and jealousy, many former child soldiers were provided benefits through the Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration process in order to put down arms and reintegrate into civilian life. This made people with disabilities, who received little to nothing post-conflict, envious, leading to more tensions and resentment. They were also frustrated with repeated unfulfilled promises of reparations and other peace building efforts: according to the authors, “the lack of reparations or government assistance for persons disabled by war have left many of them in a horrible living situations,” and “many of the participants who are disabled by war agreed that life is ‘worse now than during the war.’” The authors conclude that these unintended consequences “may have impacts for future peace in the country.”

5. *Dissention Among Disabled Group*

The peace building process led to disagreements between different groups of people with disabilities (for example, levels and distribution of reparations). It also caused some dissension between survivors with and without disabilities, given that people with disabilities were promised certain benefits, such as free education and healthcare, while non-disabled survivors were not. The authors state that “overall the majority of participants believed that in the special case of post-conflict peace building, all groups implementing initiatives should ensure that they do not cause further dissension.”

6. *Experiences with the Policy Makers*

Overall, survivors with disabilities were extremely dissatisfied with the national government. While the Truth and Reconciliation process was developed under multiple parties, it was ultimately the responsibility of the national government to implement - and the government was extremely underwhelming in that regard. Some participants were more measured in their response about the government’s actions, recognizing that it was stretched thin and overwhelmed. For their parts, the authors saw some government actors being genuinely concerned but overwhelmed, and some government actors being entirely un-attentive.

Participants were generally grateful to members of the international community, especially the United Nations, for their concern and efforts towards building peace - though they often had criticisms of the processes & logistics. A minority of participants were critical of the international community, specifically its lack of pressure on the national government to implement reparations programs and its lack of providing funding for ongoing peace building efforts and “projects created by disabled people’s organizations.”

Gottschalk’s study gives a valuable glimpse into the lived experience of people with disabilities throughout post-conflict peace building. Unfortunately, the process in Sierra Leone did not appropriately address the disabled population’s needs. Poor process was juxtaposed on existing prejudices, a lack of funding, and unfulfilled promises in a way that left many in dire straits. This does not mean, though, that peace building is inherently hopeless for people with disabilities - this was only one post-conflict situation, and there were some (albeit limited) positive outcomes. Instead, it provides insight into key focus areas and room for improvement in all future efforts.

Why Include Persons with Disabilities in the Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding Process?

International Conventions

The binding, comprehensively endorsed standard for disability rights was the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for People with Disabilities, adopted by the General Assembly in 1993; it was demonstrable proof that the United Nations had elevated disability concerns to issues of rights and justice. This agreement was further defined and evolved by the development of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, or “the convention”) in 2006. The UNCRPD has generated efforts by international human rights non-government organizations (NGOs) toward addressing people with disabilities as a key constituency, and the rights of people with disabilities as an inclusive component of their work.

The General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the UNCRPD in December 2006, making it the first human rights treaty to be adopted in the 21st century. Containing 50 articles, the UNCRPD provides a recognized international standard for the human rights of persons with disabilities. It also specifically addresses conflict situations: *Article 11* requires Parties “to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and the occurrence of natural disasters.” It would stand to reason this evolution would encourage conflict-resolution and peacebuilding donors, organizations, policymakers and field practitioners to fully implement the principles of a human rights-based approach in a way that demands the participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in all processes and activities that affect their enjoyment of human rights. However, it appears that most civil society actors have yet to embrace a mandate to include disability leaders/NGOs as civil society participants in their funding, research or peacebuilding initiatives.

Moving from the Charity/Medical Model to Social Justice Model

As the charity and medical models have fallen by the wayside as reasonable approaches for addressing persons with disabilities and disability - like gender, age and sexual orientation - has become a human rights and social justice issue, the role of persons with disabilities in peacebuilding has also reportedly evolved. To move from a charity model to a human rights model means that persons with disabilities are no longer viewed as the problem but as persons with rights; as subjects rather than objects. (UNHCR), *The Current Use and Future Potential of United Nations Human Rights Instruments in the Context of Disability*, (Geneva: 2002), 1-2.) In addition, the social model of disability (which is distinct from the social justice model) has become increasingly prevalent. The social model depicts the issue of “disability” as a socially created problem and a matter of the full integration of individuals into society; therefore, including people with disabilities into the peacebuilding process is the socially just approach. (see Oliver 1990).

Building a Movement

Given the general progression of human rights movements, the next logical evolutionary step for persons with disabilities on the world stage would be to follow that of women as active shapers of their own collective destiny, not as bystanders to it. People with disabilities have shown their skills and abilities in the advocacy field with the passage of legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and with the UNCRPD. However, both actions mark long years of efforts to establish a distinct model for civil rights for a segment of the population, which often entailed advocacy by people with disabilities as a group. If people with disabilities establish themselves as an integral component of the peacebuilding community, it would be an indication that people with disabilities are seen as an integrated part of the peacebuilding movement and not separate from, excluded

from, or irrelevant to it.

How to include Persons with Disabilities in the Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding Process?

Understanding the current state of research and common practices suggests the following:

- People with disabilities may have a role in highlighting structural violence in societies and spearheading the movement to transform relationships. This may first happen between non-disabled and disabled communities, and eventually can set the stage for wider work between “oppressors” and oppressed groups (See Kerr (2013)). If this is indeed an avenue to pursue in terms of policy recommendation, it would be worthwhile to address the policy/implementation gap at the outset, identifying action plans when a local, regional or national government is realistically unprepared or culturally averse to taking seriously such practices.
- One major debate with regard to people with disabilities and conflict resolution and formal peace processes is over the following assumption: “if a particular society/country/culture does not adequately value the needs of the disabled community pre-conflict, it will not do so in the post-conflict peacebuilding process.” The literature has reflected both sides of the debate. This might be a promising avenue for future case studies on disability and conflict/peacebuilding.
- The literature on all aspects of disability studies as related to conflict and development overwhelmingly argues that the disability community must be present at the table. This can include legislative decisions, community development projects, negotiations, and local peacemaking practices, to name a few. More specifically, the war disabled as well as those with congenital disabilities or disabilities acquired pre-conflict must all be included, as their needs are distinct, though sometimes overlapping. It is also suggested that representatives from each side of the conflict be present in peacemaking efforts.

Fundamental Principles: The Disability Perspective

From the literature review and our own conclusions, we have identified several fundamental principles for including people with disabilities in the peace building process.

- The inclusion of persons with disabilities in civil society’s conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives will make a significant contribution in resolving conflict and creating and sustaining peace between communities.
- When disability leaders/NGOs are included in civil society’s conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts, field practitioners are able to foster the inclusion of all affected populations, which contributes to the successful implementation of peacebuilding initiatives.
- There is a strong incentive for disability leaders/NGOs to support civil society’s efforts to ensure the provision of security and peace, especially because persons with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by civil conflicts through the loss of basic needs and an increase in the numbers of persons with disabilities from combat and civilian casualties.
- Including disability leaders/NGOs in the civil society peacebuilding process increases the effectiveness and innovation of peacebuilding initiatives because disability leaders/NGOs bring key experiences and specific skills that are directly applicable to implementing effective peacebuilding initiatives.
- International donors and agencies should adequately fund and prioritize efforts addressing people with disabilities. They should also pressure post-conflict governments to do the same and follow through on existing commitments.

- The fundamental commonality of the experience of disability in all societies is a powerful and successful unifying theme for peacebuilding initiatives across conflict divides.
- Disability focused, civil society peacebuilding initiatives across conflict divides can be successful even when peacebuilding initiatives with other focuses, or by other civil society actors, are not politically tolerated.
- The social legitimacy of the negative attitude of policymakers and field practitioners expressed in private statements, such as “why should we include in our efforts one of the least-empowered, least powerful segments of society when the problem is with decision makers?” needs to be challenged
- People with disabilities and their allies should use participation in peacebuilding as an opportunity to advocate for broader disability rights. As active stakeholders, they gain political recognition that can be carried through the immediate peace building phase to general civil society efforts. Peace building processes themselves can also be used as opportunities to expand disability rights, for example through placing people with disabilities on ongoing commissions or passing comprehensive disability rights legislation in any political reforms.
- Some actions can unintentionally create, reinvigorate, or exacerbate conflicts between groups. Stakeholders throughout the peace building process should be cognizant of these unintended consequences and undertake their efforts with care. Wherever possible, this should be used as motivation to have comprehensive peace building, with equal representation and active participation by all groups, including people with disabilities.
- Stakeholders should continually analyze their peace building efforts, and ask whether enough is being done to address people with disabilities. Gottschalk recommends a series of “disability checks” - or key considerations as the process goes on. They are:
 - “Has this process considered the extent to which it may further victimize persons with disabilities, particularly in the case of persons disabled by war? Could this process in any way unintentionally violate the human rights of any group of persons or perpetuate further conflict?”
 - “Has this process considered what justice means to persons disabled by war? Will this process be committed to achieving that justice?”
 - “To what extent does this process provide for equal representation and consultation for persons with disabilities? Are there special measures in place to ensure their accessibility at all levels of the project design?” (Gottschalk pg. xlix)

Recommendations

Given that people with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by violent conflict - and that many people, including civilians, become disabled through violent conflict - it is both fair and prudent to include them in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts to the greatest extent possible. Full inclusion contributes to more comprehensive justice and reconciliation, which are necessary to create resilient, long-lasting peace. It also follows the ongoing evolution from the charity/medical model of disability to the social justice and human rights models, empowering people with disabilities as active participants and advocates in the peacebuilding process. Disability groups that participate will be more likely to have their grievances addressed, receive appropriate support, be viewed as legitimate stakeholders, and build healthy group relationships with other post-conflict groups, among other benefits.

It is thus imperative that people with disabilities are included, by design, in conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes. Doing so will first require learning about existing peacebuilding efforts, how people with disabilities are included in them, current outcomes, and further desires of people with

disabilities. This can be achieved by initiating, developing, and funding a series of case studies documenting the contributions of people with disabilities in countries active in conflict resolution. These case studies and existing knowledge (literature, organizational, or otherwise) can then be used to develop a blueprint for including all disability groups in future peacebuilding efforts - which should then be distributed and used worldwide. Transforming conflict resolution to include people with disabilities is imperative to ensure that their human rights are respected and peacebuilding is truly effective.

References (Listed alphabetically):

Blaser, A., Kanavou, A. and Schleier, S. (11-2013) "The Peace Studies/Disability Studies Nexus" *Peace Studies Journal* (6) 4.

Boyce, W., Koros, M., Hodgson, J., "Community Based rehabilitation: A Strategy for Peacebuilding (2002) BMC International Health and Human Rights

Cardozo, B., Bilukha, O., Crawford, C., Shaikh, I., Wolfe, M., Gerber, M. & Anderson, M. (2004) "Mental Health, Social Functioning, and Disability in Postwar Afghanistan." *JAMA*. P. 575-584.

Don Cohoon, W. (11-2013) "Religious Peace and Disability" *Peace Studies Journal* (6) 4.

Dow, K. (2013) "Suspending the Ethical: Autonomy, Disability, and Shalom"

Gottschalk, Pearl Praise (2007) "How Are We in This World Now?": Examining the Experiences of Persons Disabled by War in the Peace Processes of Sierra Leone (2007) (unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Victoria)

Grove, S., Grove, N. and Myerscough, T. (2010) "Intellectual Disability and War: Issues for Consideration." *Journal on Developmental Disabilities* (16) 1

Hallahan, Lorna (2008) "The Whirlwinds of War: Conflict, Disability, and Theological Reflection," in *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, 12:3, 214-220

Human Rights Watch (2010) As if We Weren't Human: Discrimination and Violence against Women with Disabilities in Northern Uganda

International Disability Alliance (2011) IDA Submission to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women Day of General Discussion on Women in Conflict and Post Conflict Situations (49th Session, Jul.18.2011)

International Disability Alliance (2-2014) "Disabilities and Inequalities in the Sustainable Development Process". *Briefing Paper for the Open Working Group Session on Promoting Equality*. Feb.5.2014.

Kerr, Stephanie (2013) Disability and conflict; exploring how the peace process in Northern Ireland assesses and addresses the needs of persons with disabilities, *Disability & Society*, 28:6, 826-838

Kett, M., Stubbs, S. and Yao, R. (6-2005) "Disability in Conflict and Emergency Situations: Focus on Tsunami-affected Areas" International Disability and Development Consortium – Disability Knowledge and Research Programme.

Meyers, S. (11-2013) "Wounded Warriors or One of the Crowd?: Civil War, Citizenship, and Disability in Nicaragua" *Peace Studies Journal* (6) 4.

Oliver, M. (1990) "The Politics of Disablement" London: MacMillan

Ortoleva, Stephanie (2010) Women with Disabilities: The Forgotten Peace Builders, *Loyola of Los Angeles International and Comparative Law Review* 33, 83 (2010).

Peacebuilding Initiative. (2009) Empowerment: Persons with Disabilities
<http://www.peacebuildinginitiative.org/indexd147.html?pageid=1964>

Phillips, M. (1988) "Disability and Ethnicity in Conflict : A Study in Transformation". Women with Disabilities: Essays in Psychology, Culture and Politics. P. 195-213.

Reilly, R. (2008). "Disabilities Among Refugees and Conflict-Affected Populations." *Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children*

Rohwerder, Brigitte (2013) Intellectual disabilities, violent conflict and humanitarian assistance: advocacy of the forgotten, *Disability & Society* 28:6, 770-783

Tamashiro, T. (2010) "Impact of Conflict on Children's Health and Disability" Background paper for Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2011

Thapa, S. Hauff, E. (2011) " Perceived needs, self-reported health and disability among displaced persons during an armed conflict in Nepal" . *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol*. P.589-595.

Trani, Jean-Francois, Maria Kett, Parul Bakhshi & Nicola Bailey (2011) Disability, vulnerability and citizenship: to what extent is education a protective mechanism for children with disabilities in countries affected by conflict? *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 15:10, 1187-1203

UNHCR. (2010) Conclusion on Refugees with Disabilities and Other Persons with Disabilities Protected and Assisted by UNHCR". No. 110 (LXI)