

Youth Briefing

The role of youth with disabilities in advocacy



Who are youth with disabilities?

Leonard Cheshire recognises the 'lifecycle approach' to youth, defined as the transition between childhood and adulthood. These are the years when all young people go through physical and psychological maturation, and are expected to complete their education, acquire skills and assume a social identity. All of this will enable them to fully participate in society.

The United Nations (UN), for statistical consistency across regions, defines youth as persons aged between 15 and 24.³ However, there is acknowledgement that taking a lifecycle approach is valuable. This is because it goes beyond defining young people by age when identifying what it means to become an adult.

It allows the factoring in of young people who are likely to be most excluded because they experience multiple discrimination.

Youth with disabilities make up a hugely diverse group of society, often with different needs. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) identifies those with disabilities as individuals who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, when combined with negative attitudes or environmental barriers, prevent them from taking a full and active role in society.⁴

Introduction

Estimates suggest that there are between 180 and 220 million youth with disabilities worldwide. Nearly 80% of them live in developing countries.¹

Youth with disabilities are still amongst the most marginalised and poorest of the world's youth.² They are routinely excluded from most educational, economic, social and cultural opportunities.

With half the world's population below 15, these numbers can be expected to rise markedly over coming decades, particularly in low and middle-income countries.

This will not simply reflect a rising birth rate. Better medical interventions now allow growing numbers of disabled infants and children to survive into adolescence.

1 Groce, N.E. (2003). HIV/AIDS and people with disability. *The Lancet*, 361(9367), 1401-1402

2 Groce, N.E. (2004) 'Adolescents and Youth with Disabilities: Issues and Challenges'. *Asia Pacific Disability Rehabilitation Journal*. 15(2):13-32 <http://www.aifo.it/english/resources/online/apdrj/apdrj204/adolescent.pdf>

3 <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/youth/youth-definition/>

4 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 2

Situation analysis

The CRPD introduces an explicit obligation on governments to consult with persons with disabilities when developing policies and legislation that affects them.⁵

It also demands the provision of disability- and age-appropriate assistance to enable children with disabilities to exercise the right to be heard and taken seriously.⁶

However, in practice, youth with disabilities often fall between the cracks; mainstream development programmes for youth rarely include youth with disabilities.

Programmes for disabled populations, where these exist, are often no more inclusive, concentrating either on children with disabilities in schools or on the employment and social integration of adults with disabilities.

Globally, one of the greatest impediments to youth with disabilities is stigma, which leads to social isolation and discrimination. This can make youth with disabilities feel cautious about their role in society.

'Yes, we want to fight for our rights. But no, we are afraid of how society will take us and the categories, which matter a lot to young people.'

Youth with a disability

Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs), that are run by and for persons with disabilities, exist in all countries and are a powerful advocacy base for change.

But few DPOs have organised systems of youth groups, internship or training programmes whereby youth with disabilities are brought into the organisation to represent the voice of youth with disabilities, or are trained to begin to assume leadership roles.

Equally, without disaggregated data on disability in relation to youth, advocating for the rights of youth is challenging for DPOs and they are at risk of not representing a large proportion of the people they serve.

Why engage youth with disabilities?

Youth with disabilities have the potential to be strong agents of change as they have the energy and idealism about the world they see around them.

This is especially true with the increased use of social media and other Internet-driven tools for civic participation.

Technology can break down barriers to participation for youth with disabilities. It offers great potential to affect governance in developing nations. It can influence how citizens voice their concerns and claim their rights, and how leaders govern.

'The world has become one because of the use of technology. Most of the youth are the ones who are very conversant with the technology. We need to empower them to make sure that they use technology to the best of their abilities.'

DPO member

5 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 4.3

6 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 7



Youth with disabilities are experts in their own experience and can bring a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by themselves and their peers.

This makes youth with disabilities ideally placed to become part of the solution to the problems they and their communities face.

Unless these millions of youth with disabilities are included in development efforts, the ambitions of leaving no-one behind in development efforts will not be realised.

Youth as actors in development

Leonard Cheshire places youth with disabilities at the heart of issues affecting their lives by developing them into agents of social change.

In order to do this, Leonard Cheshire understands the importance of ensuring programmes are youth-led,⁷ encouraging youth with disabilities to identify issues important to them and link them to Agenda 2030 and CRPD frameworks.

⁷ Roger Hart, Children's Participation: The Theory And Practice of Involving Young Citizens In Community Development And Environmental Care (UNICEF,1997)

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is a commitment to eradicate poverty and achieve sustainable development by 2030 worldwide. It has an overarching principle to ensure no one is left behind.

2030 and Counting is Leonard Cheshire's global initiative to place a diverse range of youth with disabilities at the centre of the Sustainable Development Goals and better connect youth to the disability movement, specifically DPOs.

It aims to build the engagement of youth with disabilities in this process to ensure disability-inclusive policies are implemented in line with **'if you are not named you are not counted.'**

The initiative brings together youth with disabilities and DPOs, starting in Kenya, the Philippines and Zambia to lead on citizen-generated data collection.

This will build the evidence base for DPOs and youth with disabilities to effectively advocate for their rights in relation to SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing), SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work).



The project has three phases:

1) Leadership and reporter training:

A centralised training for lead youth with disabilities and DPOs on leadership and citizen reporting. This is followed by the recruitment and cascaded training of additional teams of youth with disabilities in each country.

2) Monitoring through technology: The trained youth with disabilities will use their mobile phones to report their experiences and those of their peers and submit them to an online reporting hub.

3) Advocacy activities: DPOs and youth with disabilities will share their stories and data trends with duty bearers. This will be done through social media and global/national advocacy events in order to ensure disability-inclusive policies are implemented.



Leonard Cheshire youth leader attending the UN's Conference of State Parties 2018



Leonard Cheshire youth leaders advocating during a radio takeover in the Philippines



Leonard Cheshire youth leader on camera sharing their experience of living with a disability in Kenya

Want to know more?

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