

# IDS Bulletin

Transforming Development Knowledge

Volume 50 | Number 1 | May 2019

## EXPLORING RESEARCH–POLICY PARTNERSHIPS IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Editors **James Georgalakis** and  
**Pauline Rose**



<b>Notes on Contributors</b>	iii
<b>Foreword</b>	
Diana Dalton	ix
<b>Introduction: Identifying the Qualities of Research–Policy Partnerships in International Development – A New Analytical Framework</b>	
James Georgalakis and Pauline Rose	1
<b>Rethinking Research Impact through Principles for Fair and Equitable Partnerships</b>	
Kate Newman, Sowmyaa Bharadwaj and Jude Fransman	21
<b>Pathways to Impact: Insights from Research Partnerships in Uganda and India</b>	
Rachel Hinton, Rona Bronwin and Laura Savage	43
<b>Exploring Partnerships between Academia and Disabled Persons' Organisations: Lessons Learned from Collaborative Research in Africa</b>	
Maria Kett, Mark T. Carew, John-Bosco Asiimwe, Richard Bwalya, Anderson Gitonga, Boakai A. Nyehn, Joyce Olenja, Leslie Swartz and Nora Groce	65
<b>Layered and Linking Research Partnerships: Learning from YOUR World Research in Ethiopia and Nepal</b>	
Vicky Johnson, Anannia Admassu, Andrew Church, Jill Healey and Sujeeta Mathema	79
<b>Fundamental Challenges in Academic–Government Partnership in Conflict Research in the Pastoral Lowlands of Ethiopia</b>	
Mercy Fekadu Mulugeta, Fana Gebresenbet, Yonas Tariku and Ekal Nettir	99
<b>Regional Research–Policy Partnerships for Health Equity and Inclusive Development: Reflections on Opportunities and Challenges from a Southern African Perspective</b>	
Nicola Yeates, Themba Moeti and Mubita Luwabelwa	121
<b>How Did Research Partnerships Contribute to Bangladesh's Progress in Improving Lives?</b>	
Mushtaque Chowdhury	143
<b>Glossary</b>	151

# Exploring Partnerships between Academia and Disabled Persons' Organisations: Lessons Learned from Collaborative Research in Africa<sup>\*†</sup>

Maria Kett,<sup>1</sup> Mark T. Carew,<sup>2</sup> John-Bosco Asimwe,<sup>3</sup> Richard Bwalya,<sup>4</sup> Anderson Gitonga,<sup>5</sup> Boakai A. Nyehn,<sup>6</sup> Joyce Olenja,<sup>7</sup> Leslie Swartz<sup>8</sup> and Nora Groce<sup>9</sup>

**Abstract** In this article, we discuss how our academic research on disability and international development in five African countries has benefited hugely from active collaboration with advocates, practitioners, and policymakers, ultimately ensuring that research evidence is used to inform policy and practice. Whilst building such partnerships is seen as good practice, it is particularly important when working on disability issues, as the clarion call of the disability movement, 'nothing about us without us', attests. This is not just a slogan. Without the active and critical engagement of disabled people – as researchers, participants, advocates – the evidence gathered would not have the same impact. This article discusses experiences from research in Liberia, Kenya, Uganda, Sierra Leone, and Zambia. It highlights the challenges and opportunities such partnerships can bring in achieving the goals of leaving no one behind and doing nothing without the active engagement and inclusion of persons with disabilities.

**Keywords:** disability, participation, capacity building, partnership, Liberia, Kenya, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Zambia.

## 1 Introduction

Over the past few decades across the field of international development, there has been much talk of participation and participatory approaches to ensure the voices of the traditionally voiceless are heard. At the same time, critiques of these approaches have highlighted the inherently unequal power relations and dynamics within these participatory relationships (e.g. White 1996; Cornwall 2008). As an approach, participation has its roots in anthropology, where anthropologists have long debated the issues of speaking *about* and speaking *for*, in relation to marginalised groups and populations.

© 2019 The Authors. *IDS Bulletin* © Institute of Development Studies | DOI: 10.19088/1968-2019.106

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence (CC BY), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original authors and source are credited and any modifications or adaptations are indicated.

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

The *IDS Bulletin* is published by Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK

This article is part of *IDS Bulletin* Vol. 50 No. 1 May 2019 'Exploring Research–Policy Partnerships in International Development'; the Introduction is also recommended reading.



Similarly, there has been much debate, particularly since the 1990s, around who is speaking on behalf of whom within the international disability movement – as expressed in its slogan ‘nothing about us without us’. Mirroring this mantra, the trajectory of praxis within the field of disability and international development has been for inclusion, as communicated by the use of the word ‘inclusion’ to modify existing subfields (e.g. inclusive development, inclusive education, inclusive design, etc.). While this is laudable, we argue here that ‘inclusion’ risks becoming the new buzzword, devoid of intention and politics, in much the same way Cornwall (2008) argued that participation did.

In a recent paper based on our poverty alleviation research for disabled people in Liberia (Kett *et al.* forthcoming), we noted that there was a worrying trend towards making inclusion a ‘technocratic process’, based more on tokenism and a mechanistic focus on how to achieve inclusion, rather than a *politicised* one. Our main concern with this was that while there is a need to understand the technical process of inclusion, by removing the political aspects, the desired societal transformation to achieve equity and inclusion is unlikely to be achieved solely through mechanistic means. As such, we reflect the same concerns about processes that Sarah White identified in her seminal article around participation (White 1996). White identified four levels of participation (nominal, instrumental, representative, and transformative), which are mediated by a range of factors including power dynamics, capacity, and confidence in the likelihood of achievements. She also made the point that genuine participation should create tensions and conflict, which in turn fosters conditions for dialogue, collaboration, and inclusion.

Andrea Cornwall picks up these different aspects of participation, and argues that as a malleable concept, it can be reframed to mean anything demanded of it; however, therein lies the fundamental problem (Cornwall 2008: 269). Moreover, Cornwall further argues that those who end up in the referent categories (e.g. ‘women’, ‘the poor’, or indeed, people with disabilities) may not in fact view themselves through this lens at all (Cornwall 2008: 277). She surmises, like White, that participation is a valid concept, but that its use risks delegitimising popular protest. Have we now reached a position where we face the same challenges with the concept of inclusion? Not only who (or what) is being written about, but who is doing the writing and in what context?

While the growing number of such partnerships and collaborations has been made easier through modern technology, this also raises questions about what results from these collaborations, both in terms of key learnings for these partnerships in the near future as well as longer-term changes. A key explicit aim of many international research collaborations is the transfer of skills to international partners. Where such capacity building has been discussed in terms of North–South partnership, this has traditionally carried the unspoken assumption that the Southern partners are the beneficiaries of capacity building, while the Northern partners are the providers (Binka 2005). In practice,

the reproduction of this model of capacity building has often led to a North–South power asymmetry, where Southern partners are excluded from experiencing the benefits of the research collaboration on an equitable basis to Northern partners, for example in sharing authorship of research publications.

Adding a ‘disability component’ to this can shift the dynamics even further, with assumptions about power, voice, and representation (Albert 2006). However, perhaps what is needed is to think more broadly about the concept of inclusion and see these partnerships as the basis for politicised and engaged debates, whereby all members of the research team are the ones being included – not just those with disabilities. In doing so, we believe that all partners became more aware of the issues facing persons with disabilities, how they may include and incorporate them in their particular area of work, and how they could work better – and more inclusively – going forward.

While acknowledging the essential need to continue to train and build the capacity of disabled researchers globally, we wish to consider two related issues within disability-inclusive development and research in this article. The first of these is how to build the capacity of existing researchers (who could be disabled or non-disabled) who work in fields other than disability studies. These researchers represent a valuable and (hopefully) readily available source of expertise that could be harnessed and applied to disability issues, including the much-needed first step of gaining high-quality, accurate disability data, helpful to evaluate the current status of disability inclusion in national settings. However, in countries without a history of a strong disability movement, knowledge of disability issues is often sparse amongst professional researchers, limiting their efficacy to work independently on disability issues at the outset. This is compounded by the fact that disability has often been sidelined, or is seen as a specialist issue, which has resulted in a lack of focus in more generalised subject areas such as economics, politics, or other social sciences.

The second issue concerns the truism that not every person wants to be a researcher. Another key additional way to ensure disability-inclusive research and development is through close collaboration and capacity building of disabled persons’ organisations (DPOs). The involvement of DPOs by governments in matters concerning disabled people is promoted by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008).<sup>10</sup> Thus, these organisations are often the first port of call within high-level governmental consultations and planning concerning people with disabilities; and where policies are set without considering the needs of people with disabilities, the voices of DPO members are usually at the forefront advocating for change. This is not to suggest that DPOs are wholly unproblematic in terms of disability inclusion as, for instance, they are often run by men with physical impairments, meaning that the voice and agency of other groups – for example, disabled women and of those with different impairment

(e.g. learnings) – can be excluded from advocacy and lobbying of these groups (Yeo and Moore 2003).

Notwithstanding this, while the effectiveness of DPOs has varied between and within countries both in terms of their range of representation of disabled voices and of their overall impact, in many settings they are now part and parcel of the mainstream political process (e.g. National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda;<sup>11</sup> see Yeo and Moore 2003), making DPO involvement instrumental in disability-inclusive development. When partnering with academics, while DPO members may not necessarily need to know how to 'do' research in terms of all its cyclic components (e.g. theory generation, academic publication), understanding the key product of research – evidence – and how it may inform organisational activities is certainly crucial to DPO efforts. Thus, DPOs have much to gain from collaborations with professional researchers, who can build their capacity in this and other aspects; and vice versa.

In this article, we discuss how research on disability in Liberia, Kenya, Uganda, Sierra Leone, and Zambia has benefited hugely from the active collaboration and co-construction (rather than mere inclusion) with advocates, practitioners, and policymakers to ensure that the evidence gathered is credible and inclusive. We also discuss how project partners perceive their capacity to have been built and how the project may have effected longer-lasting changes in terms of partnership. We also highlight how our partnerships were formed and maintained. This was not without challenges, but as Sarah White noted, it is precisely in these challenges that inclusion becomes politicised and in turn produces more relevant results that can be used to inform policy and practice. Without the active and critical engagement of disabled people – as researchers, participants, advocates – the evidence gathered would not have the same impact.

It is also worth noting that the tripartite nature of the partnerships discussed here, although effective in this context, were still led by Northern researchers, even though efforts were made to ensure equality amongst the partners at all stages of the research. Whilst acknowledging the fundamental power dynamics within these relationships (Swartz 2009), it is interesting to observe that where they were most effective was in strengthening in-country collaborations between national researchers who had previously undertaken little or no work on disability issues, and advocates, who felt they gained credibility from the evidence provided by the collaboration between them and the national research institutes.

## **2 Method and results**

The material in this article is based on discussion and experiences of colleagues and partners over the course of two projects, 'Bridging the Gap: Examining Disability and Development in Four African Countries'<sup>12</sup> and 'Understanding the Political and Institutional Conditions for Effective Poverty Reduction for Persons with Disabilities

in Liberia',<sup>13</sup> as well as material from a panel at the Bridging the Gap final conference. This was held on 12–13 March 2018, and the panel discussion was entitled 'Bridging the Gap between DPOs and Academia: Lessons Learned from Collaborative Research in Africa' held on the second day and lasting approximately one hour. The session was chaired by two Bridging the Gap Co-Investigators (Mark T. Carew) and (Maria Kett) and involved five project partners as panel discussants (Anderson Gitonga, John-Bosco Asiimwe, Joyce Olenja, Richard Bwalya, and Leslie Swartz), including four academics and one DPO member and representing Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, and Zambia. Inclusive of the chairs, two of the participants in the session were persons with disabilities (one from the global North and one from the global South) and there was a mix of early-career and senior academics. The last author and project Principal Investigator (Nora Groce) was also in the audience and took part in the Q&A towards the end of session. The session was transcribed by a professional company, as well as in closed captioning for audience members on the day.

What follows are excerpts from the transcript of the session, as well as of transcribed material from other interviews with project partners, organised thematically and presented with additional commentary to facilitate theoretical and practical linkages regarding disability-inclusive research and development strategies. Additional inputs from partners in another DFID-ESRC-funded project (Understanding the Political and Institutional Conditions for Effective Poverty Reduction for Persons with Disabilities in Liberia) have also been incorporated into this article.

### **3 How is capacity built and by whom?**

One of the most common areas discussed in North–South partnerships is that of 'capacity building', but less commonly discussed is how an individual or an organisation knows they have enough capacity: when do we know we have 'built capacity' and what does having one's capacity built look like and feel like? Within disability-inclusive research and development collaborations, the North–South direction undoubtedly represents one way to build capacity, but the inclusive nature of the partnership also allows the capacity building to be bidirectional, begging the question 'Whose capacity is being built and by whom?'

Within the session panel, discussants from academic backgrounds affirmed that they had learnt skills through partnership with DPOs:

*Disability research, at least in our setting – is not as well established as any other, so for me, I am on a learning curve and continue to learn more.*  
(Academic partner)

*The movement has been through quite a lot. We have learnt that things have been built from the onset, and we were trained, and I didn't have experience relating to the Washington Group questions,<sup>12</sup> and not many have that much knowledge in terms of using that.* (Academic partner)

The first panel discussant comments on the dearth of disability research in their context. This is common in many settings and research subareas globally. For example, although an evidence base around disability and sexuality is emerging, there are comparatively few studies on the subject conducted in low- and middle-income countries (Carew *et al.* 2017). A contributing factor and perhaps also a cause of this lack of disability research is that most scholars very rarely receive training on disability issues (e.g. how to collect good-quality disability data), despite the fact that disability is a cross-cutting issue. This is also signalled by the second panel discussant who noted that they had previously had very little training regarding the Washington Group questions on disability. Thus, collaboration with a DPO, as well as colleagues with dedicated disability expertise, represents a valuable capacity-building opportunity for those wanting to learn about disability and how it is relevant in their fields.

DPO members also felt that their capacity was being built through partnerships with academics:

*For us, we believe we develop capacities of colleagues at [the] University and, for instance, in the area of disability, the types of disabilities, where to get these policies. They always came to us to discuss those kind of things. How to handle persons, for instance, who are deaf, persons with a psychosocial disability, we were happy to train that team, and I'm sure in some way we increased the capacity to be able to deal with persons with disabilities. (DPO member)*

Joining up with what the academic partners communicated, the DPO members suggest that one key learning provided through partnership with a DPO is the training they can provide around disability. Here, the discussant highlights one practical element, namely that academic partners can learn how to work with people who have disabilities. This can be a difficult concept to grasp for many non-disabled people due to the infrequency of contact opportunities that most have with people who are disabled, and the heterogeneous nature of impairments themselves. For example, working with people who have physical disabilities does not equip individuals with much relevant experience to work with people who have learning disabilities. With that said, there are of course no special skills needed to work with people who have disabilities who are largely the same as any other individuals; much of the value of any training is about increasing the confidence of partners around working with people with disabilities. This is also part of the learning curve that the first panel discussant communicated. It also may have an additional benefit of raising awareness around inclusion of students with disabilities, and in turn because of this, increase the likelihood of their participation in higher education as academic staff are more open to facilitate this.

In addition to increasing both awareness and expertise around disability inclusion for academics, the partnership also facilitated increased awareness and understanding of the research process, as well as providing an evidence base, for DPOs. As one panel discussant



noted when giving reflections about what DPOs can learn through partnership with academics:

*We also gained immensely. As a DPO, our capacity was very well built. And in a number of ways, some were simple but made a difference. How do you develop a questionnaire? We use questionnaires. When we do a training needs assessment, we always do a questionnaire. We went with them through that, and there was a lot of knowledge we gained on ways, for example, of how to do a focus group discussion. We are getting the skills. We always do this in our work. Other simple ways like mobilisation, talking to the community, how do you develop a questionnaire, how do you negotiate, issues around report writing, and how do you develop a report? Our staff were trained around that. Presentation skills. We went into the field with them when they were doing the presentation and you could see the professionalism in it, and we can imitate that and copy that. It is also a skill... so these are simple, simple skills, but they make a major, major difference in our lives. (DPO member)*

The quote above highlights how research skills that are commonplace in academic work, such as survey methodology, report writing, and scientific communication are of immense value to DPOs in their day-to-day work (e.g. training need assessments). Thus, the key learnings for DPOs engaged in research collaboration is being able to equip their staff with these skills.

#### **4 What are the positives and downsides of collaboration?**

One academic panel discussant stated that DPO collaboration was particularly useful for community entry:

*When it came to working on disability, we found it valuable that we had to work with an organisation that already has ground presence, so in terms of community entry, [the DPO] became useful in that sense – that we could connect with the various networks of the community, which makes it much easier to work. In terms of trust building, we didn't have to invest too much because we were [a]ready working with people with disabilities as our guide at a community level. (Academic partner)*

In some settings, it can be very difficult for researchers to identify and collect data from people with disabilities. Part of this issue is a lack of good-quality disability data. Despite the availability of a short set of disability questions designed to generate an internationally comparable prevalence estimate of disability, poor measures of disability (e.g. a binary yes or no question) continue to be employed in censuses and other population-level surveys as means of gaining disability data. This means that it is often very difficult to identify disabled people within communities. However, DPOs can constitute an extremely useful link in this respect and as such, a partnership with a DPO can assist researchers by (purposively) identifying people with disabilities. The panel discussant also mentions the concept of 'trust'. In some low- and middle-income settings, certain communities are over-researched or else feel that they are frequently involved in initiatives which do not ultimately benefit

them. Feelings such as these may be accentuated amongst people with disabilities who generally encounter more exclusion and marginalisation, in comparison to people without disabilities. Consequently, partnership with DPOs signal to communities and people with disabilities in particular that projects are working to benefit the community.

Related to this, nationally based academics – particularly those who are not specialists in disability – have an important role to play for DPO members as they are often closer to the seat of power, and also bring a different perspective to issues that, for example, DPOs may have been grappling with. They may also be more sensitive to local contexts, history, politics, and other factors. This is illustrated by a DPO panel discussant who describes how their organisation can benefit from such collaborations:

*For us as advocates, one major strategy – ensuring we achieve our goals – is to build allies. They are people who can speak on our behalf and it was very exciting to see the professor here going into meetings and presenting evidence and recommendations on our behalf. These people are so used to us, the government, but here, the [university] was speaking on issues of disabilities. It makes a difference in terms of when the same message comes as opposed to various messages. That was the most exciting part. (DPO member)*

Here, the DPO member outlines how such partnership generates new allies that can communicate crucial information around disability issues. In particular, he highlights the key role of academic partners in helping craft a cohesive message around how to empower people with disabilities and address marginalisation. This may be useful, because messages from DPOs may be bracketed by those resistant to change as special interest issues. Conversely, the addition of new voices from different sectors helps to mainstream issues and ensure that disability is considered as a cross-cutting issue. The panel discussant also describes academic partners as people who can speak on the behalf of DPOs. Academic partners are trained in the communication of evidence to the general public; for example, being able to distil the findings of complex statistical models into a set of clear-cut recommendations. These skills are useful in supporting DPOs through amassing both good-quality evidence on disability and action points from it.

However, while there are positive aspects of a more inclusive partnership, there are of course challenges. A common problem, highlighted by a colleague from Uganda, is that of research roles:

*In the area that we did, we felt that we were short-changed because it was basically just about assisting our colleagues in terms of collecting data, and data was actually sent after we did the data entry. It was analysed, and then they want to come to us, and later, the report was published, so when Bridging the Gap came around, I think we were a little bit cautious on that, and I remember when we had the meeting and we made it clear in the first meeting that we do not want to be taken in as research assistants. We want to be partners in business. (Academic partner)*

In this, the panel discussants highlight two of the most common challenges – the extent to which capacity is actually built (taking raw data for analysis, rather than working with national partners to analyse and interpret the data), and the degree of equity within and between partnerships. Such inequities are all too common between many North–South academic partnerships, and are exacerbated by a range of factors, including funding structures, grant restrictions, and teaching load, amongst other factors. This is compounded by the fact that in both the global South and North, ‘disability’ is rarely seen as a high stakes subject – something reiterated by the relative lack of funding distributed to disability-related projects.

Bucking this trend, our ESRC-DFID-funded project, ‘Bridging the Gap: Examining Disability and Development in Four African Countries’, had as one of its aims not only to explore the extent of the gap between disabled and non-disabled households in four selected countries (Kenya, Uganda, Zambia, and Sierra Leone), but also to bridge the gap between academia and DPOs. However, as evidenced by the panel discussants’ comments, their experiences led to an initial cautious feeling towards the project that tempered their expectations of the collaboration. This suggests a rule that can be extrapolated for such collaborations in general. That is, international research partners should not be conceptualised as research assistants, but rather as equal partners in the business of research. This is an oft-repeated aim but reiterates the point that all partners should be involved in each stage of the research process.

Another academic panel discussant expanded on this as a potential downside of collaboration if implemented incorrectly:

[Panel discussant] *was mentioning colonialism. The economic component is important, which is also to do with my relationship with DPOs. People will agree to anything to have the capacity built, to do this, to do that, to puppet shows. People need to feed themselves and their families. It is a difficult thing to think about. We can provide you with the raw material so you can take photographs and so on. I have been told that they didn’t want a picture of me in the room because the funders would like to see me under a tree.* (Academic partner)

The ‘puppet shows’ that this panel discussant mentions are collaborations where the partnership is implemented in such a manner so as to reinforce and emphasise existing inequalities or stereotypical depictions of the cultural contexts of the research partners. The example provided by the panel discussant (a South African) highlights the need to represent the process of actually doing research in such settings accurately, which in many cases will be almost the same as conducting research within high-income settings.

### **5 What does disability-inclusive research and development achieve in the long term?**

Several of our project partners mentioned the benefits of creating consultancy, knowledge exchange, and internship opportunities for students:

*Now there is an arrangement we have of [university] and that is the School of Law, whereby they attach students doing law to a DPO. I'm looking forward to continuing this collaboration with the professor, whereby she can attach students from the university in our department to be able to learn issues around disability data and we train people in disability issues. (DPO partner)*

*[Internships] also happened in our case during the time of our survey because we could get to know the organisations and there was a request to place some students in our organisation for internships. In our university, students are expected to do internships, but because of that collaboration, we could ask them to place our students there, so in that way, some collaboration can be strengthened, and probably some element of capacity building (Academic partner)*

*I have also opportunity to talk to students of the universities of Liberia... sharing with them my learning experience and also providing to them knowledge that will enhance activities with people with disabilities. (DPO member)*

One of the best ways to guarantee the inclusion of people with disabilities in mainstream society globally is to ensure that individuals are educated on disability issues. The placement of university students within internships at DPOs helps achieve this by providing them with exposure to disability issues. Concurrently, these students are also able to build the capacity of DPOs through offering technical skills. As such, this is an example of how disability-inclusive research can create opportunities beyond the scope of specific projects and contribute to wider change around disability issues.

Another method of building opportunities for students to learn about disability issues is for it to be taught as part of the wider curriculum (for example around rights, equity, exclusion, or other issues of social justice) that form part of their higher education. One panel discussant described how she applied new knowledge about disability gained through the Bridging the Gap project to other aspects of her university role:

*Within the school of public health, where we do a master's programme, we try to incorporate this within our lectures, and there are discussions around disability. We don't have a main course on disability as yet, and our programmes are developed as a response to what is in the market. It is almost like a cyclic thing. Once we begin to make disability so visible at many levels, we can now advocate for a fully fledged course that brings that around, but we try to use within our teaching to synthesise students around disability, at least at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. (Academic partner)*

The panel discussant describes the process as cyclic, suggesting that disability must gradually become more prominent within other subcomponents of the academic curriculum before dedicated disability courses can be introduced. Panel discussants also noted some of the continuing challenges to disability inclusion, notably around stigma and discrimination:

*For us, in terms of how this is conceived, at a community level, we continue to see a lot of discrimination and negative attitudes. (Academic partner)*

*In the community, this is a major barrier to inclusion. The attitude of people. The way you define people. There is a lot in the terms and the language that you use. You can use language that doesn't empower people, and it can isolate people, and we have numerous examples of that. (Academic partner)*

But panel discussants also commented on the role of disability-inclusive research and collaboration in challenging and changing the marginalisation of disabled people, again with the acknowledgement that achieving such equity will take time.

*[People with disabilities] have human rights and they need to be empowered, so we are seeing some good and positive changes, but we are not yet there. (Academic partner)*

## 6 Discussion

As the preceding examples highlight, there remains a tension within the disability and development sector, whereby disability issues are still seen wholly (or at least to a large extent) as either a very minor issue due to the lack of data, or as a specialist issue requiring a specific set of specialist skills. Our project partners drew attention to how the partnership models adopted in the Bridging the Gap and Liberia research built their capacity through the transfer of specialist knowledge and skills (i.e. on disability for academics, on research methodologies for DPO members). Partners also highlighted the longer-term partnerships that have resulted from the projects (e.g. internships, further funding, and consultancy opportunities), particularly their perceptions of how the partnerships formed within the duration of the project were able to challenge stakeholder notions of disability as a specialist area (i.e. through finding national expert allies through the projects). Furthermore, if the partnership model adopted by the Bridging the Gap and Liberia research projects have begun to shift attitudes towards disability-inclusive research and raised the visibility of students with disabilities within the wider academic field, then we have also achieved one of the stated aims of the research.

Although academia is certainly not always inclusive and many people with disabilities training as researchers may encounter serious barriers (e.g. Brown and Leigh 2018; Horton and Tucker 2014), much of the research and writing on disability, at least in countries with strong disability movements (e.g. the UK, USA, Australia), is now conducted

by disabled people themselves. Disability studies are also taking root in other areas of the world; for example, through the African Network for Evidence-to-Action in Disability (AfriNEAD) and the *African Journal of Disability* (AJOD). Given these promising efforts, it seems that global disability research – including that focused on development issues – will feature the voices of more disabled researchers, not less.

However, a number of challenges remain, including issues of capacity, resources, and reputation. At the start of this article, we referred to several articles critiquing the concept of participation (White 1996; Cornwall 2008). Neither of these authors suggest for a moment to not be participatory in approach; on the contrary, participation that has as its goal a transformation of existing social inequalities is an essential goal. This mirrors much of the discussions of the past decades about disability-inclusive research (Albert 2006), whereby the process of the research itself – as much as the findings – should be emancipatory and liberating. It is perhaps debatable whether we have fully achieved these laudable aims but we believe that by being as inclusive as possible across the research process, we can, as Sarah White argued, create tensions and conflict which in turn create genuinely transformative inclusion, whereby all actors have voiced their opinions, seen each other's worldviews, and the results lead to these transformations.

This requires researchers to fully engage with the politics of what and how they are researching, not just offering a 'checklist' on how to do 'inclusion'. There is as much to learn from the (sometimes painful) processes of doing the research as there is from the findings – this is a key point, and one that cannot be underestimated. Understanding constraints on local academic and DPO partners, as well as their strengths, and working together to overcome the constraints and enhance the strengths collaboratively can lead to changes in the way disability is taught to university students, or the way evidence is perceived; for example, by government ministers who hold decision-making powers. Ultimately, in order to keep this a political issue, and not just a 'tick-box' technocratic exercise, there is a need to actively engage with and include national and local partners – disabled and non-disabled – to ensure that these political aspects of inclusion are tackled head on and eventually overcome to achieve the desired societal transformations.

#### Notes

\* This issue grew out of the Impact Initiative for International Development Research which seeks to maximise impact and learning from ESRC-DFID's Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research and their Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme.

† The authors acknowledge and are grateful for the following funding sources: ESRC-DFID Joint Fund reference: ES/L005719/1 'Understanding the Political and Institutional Conditions for Effective Poverty Reduction for Persons with Disabilities in Liberia'

(Principal Investigator: Dr Maria Kett). ESRC-DFID Joint Fund reference: ES/L008785/1 'Bridging the Gap: Examining Disability and Development in Four African Countries' (Principal Investigator: Professor Nora Groce; Co-Investigators: Dr Maria Kett and Dr Mark T. Carew).

- 1 Leonard Cheshire Research Centre, University College London, UK.
- 2 Leonard Cheshire Research Centre, University College London, UK.
- 3 Makerere University, Uganda.
- 4 University of Zambia, Zambia.
- 5 United Disabled Persons of Kenya, Kenya.
- 6 National Union of Organisations of the Disabled, Liberia.
- 7 University of Nairobi, Kenya.
- 8 Stellenbosch University, South Africa.
- 9 Leonard Cheshire Research Centre, University College London, UK.
- 10 [www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html](http://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html).
- 11 NUDIPU was a partner in the Bridging the Gap research discussed here.
- 12 [www.theimpactinitiative.net/project/bridging-gap-examining-disability-and-development-four-african-countries](http://www.theimpactinitiative.net/project/bridging-gap-examining-disability-and-development-four-african-countries)
- 13 [www.theimpactinitiative.net/project/understanding-political-and-institutional-conditions-effective-poverty-reduction-persons](http://www.theimpactinitiative.net/project/understanding-political-and-institutional-conditions-effective-poverty-reduction-persons)
- 14 The Washington Group Short Set is a set of questions designed to identify people with a disability in a census or survey format, currently considered the most robust way to generate comparable international disability data. See: [www.washingtongroup-disability.com/about/](http://www.washingtongroup-disability.com/about/).

## References

- Albert, B. (ed.) (2006) *In or Out of the Mainstream? Lessons from Research on Disability and Development Cooperation*, Leeds: The Disability Press
- Binka, F. (2005) 'North–South Research Collaborations: A Move towards a True Partnership?', *Tropical Medicine and International Health* 10.3: 207–9
- Brown, N. and Leigh, J. (2018) 'Ableism in Academia: Where are the Disabled and Ill Academics?', *Disability and Society* 33.6: 985–89
- Carew, M.T.; Braathen, S.H.; Swartz, L.; Hunt, X. and Rohleder, P. (2017) 'The Sexual Lives of People with Disabilities within Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Scoping Study of Studies Published in English', *Global Health Action* 10.1: 1337342
- Cornwall, A. (2008) 'Unpacking "Participation": Models, Meanings and Practices', *Community Development Journal* 43.3: 269–83
- Horton, J. and Tucker, F. (2014) 'Disabilities in Academic Workplaces: Experiences of Human and Physical Geographers', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 39.1: 76–89
- Kett, M. *et al.* (forthcoming) 'What are the Political and Institutional Conditions Necessary for Effective Poverty Reduction for Persons with Disabilities in Liberia?' [under review]

- Swartz, L. (2009) 'Building Disability Research Capacity in Low-Income Contexts: Possibilities and Challenges', in M. MacLachlan and L. Swartz (eds), *Disability and International Development: Towards Inclusive Global Health*, London and New York: Springer
- White, S.C. (1996) 'Depoliticising Development: The Uses and Abuses of Participation', *Development in Practice* 6.1: 6–15
- Yeo, R. and Moore, K. (2003) 'Including Disabled People in Poverty Reduction Work: "Nothing About Us, Without Us"', *World Development* 31.3: 571–90