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Zambian Disability Policy Stakeholder Perspectives on the Ways that International Initiatives Influence Domestic Disability Policies

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Disability has attracted attention in international human rights and development circles and Zambian domestic policy. The purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions of Zambian disability policy stakeholders about the ways that two international initiatives, namely the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), are being reflected in domestic policy. We collected data through semi-structured interviews with 22 policy stakeholders (12 disability advocates and 10 policymakers) and analysed these data using thematic analysis. The UNCRPD was perceived to be progressively integrated into Zambian disability policy although insufficiently implemented while the SDGs have provided rhetorical influence.

1. Background

Disability has become an issue that has attracted attention in international human rights and development circles. This attention is most clearly visible through two developments: the United Nations (2006) Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the inclusion of disability into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015). While attention in international circles could be important to improve the situation of persons with disabilities, the nation state is the jurisdictional level in which policy is most relevant to people's daily lives.

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In Zambia, disability has been an issue of interest for successive governments. The UNCRPD was signed and ratified, respectively, by two Movement for Multiparty Democracy presidents (United Nations Treaty Collection, n.d.). Zambia then created the Persons with Disabilities Act (Zambia, 2012) and the National Policy on Disability (Ministry of Community Development Mother and Child Health (MCDMCH), 2015) through the tenure of two Patriotic Front presidents.

Zambia's development of disability policy – through the Act and the National Policy – has occurred during the same era in which disability has become an issue of international attention. The domestic and international movements are undoubtedly related in some ways, yet there has been little investigation of this relationship. Through an undergraduate thesis project, Zimba (2016) reported on the status of UNCRPD in Zambia by chronicling a number of domestication efforts and by assessing the levels of awareness of the UNCRPD among various constituencies. Zimba (2016) found that among civil servants, disability leaders, and Zambians with disabilities, awareness about the existence of the UNCRPD was high, yet the knowledge of the details of this convention were low. In a civil society funded consultancy, Mtonga, Kalimaposo, and Lungu (2017), examined levels of awareness of the SDGs among Zambian disability leaders and explored the extent to which persons with disabilities had been involved with Zambia's domestication of the SDGs. In this study, it was found that disability leaders were generally aware of the SDGs but felt that they were not included in the process of SDG domestication and evaluation (Mtonga et al., 2017).

Whereas there has been a significant increase in the international attention devoted to disability and the development of Zambian disability policy, there has been only minimal investigation of the ways that these two phenomena are related. In this study, we explore Zambian disability policy stakeholder perspectives of the ways that two major international initiatives – the UNCRPD and the SDGs – have been reflected in the domestic disability policy landscape. The stakeholders consulted for this study were policymakers and disability advocates, offering complementary views of the disability policy landscape.

2. Methods

2.1 Study Design

To conduct this research, we used a qualitative descriptive design (Sandelowski, 2000) and were informed by a constructionist approach (Silverman, 2014) to qualitative research. The study team was led by the first author, a Canadian researcher who was working as a physiotherapist in global health until 2012, at which time he re-focused his energies toward disability research and leadership in Zambia. The first author was supported by collaborating researchers in Canada and Zambia.

2.2 Participants and Recruitment

We interviewed twelve Zambian disability advocates and ten disability policymakers (see Table 1). When referring to the participants collectively, we use the term “disability policy stakeholders.” Disability advocates include individuals engaged in disability advocacy activities aimed at influencing national policy processes, either as leaders of disabled persons’ organisations (DPOs) or non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Disability advocate recruitment was initiated within the first author’s professional contacts, with sampling adjusted dynamically to ensure a diversity of disability experiences among participants and a variety of organisations (e.g., DPOs versus NGOs; pan-disability organisations versus organisations focused on a specific impairment like blindness). He approached potential participants directly by telephone or email. The second group of participants were disability policymakers. These individuals formulate, implement, or evaluate Zambia’s governmental policy, from either their roles in government or with influential international organisations. We approached a total of nine government ministries and agencies and international organisations working with disability in Zambia of which eight participated.

Table 1: Participating Disability Policy Stakeholders

Participant characteristic	Disability advocates	Policymakers
Gender		
Women	3	6
Men	9	4
Self-identifies as disabled		
Yes	9	0
No	3	10
Totals	12	10

2.3 Data Collection

The 22 disability policy stakeholders participated in one or two semi-structured interviews of 30-90 minutes duration (25 interviews total). The first author conducted all interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview questions were oriented to the participants’ perspectives on the development of national disability policy, informed by their own experiences and observations. The interviews were conducted in English or Zambian sign language with verbal translation, were audio-recorded, transcribed, and initially analysed using an iterative thematic coding strategy (Braun & Clarke, 2014). The results

presented in this paper focus on our analysis of data related to the interaction of international initiatives and the Zambian domestic policy landscape.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by McGill University Institutional Research Board (Protocol reference # A12-B68-17B), the University of Zambia Biomedical Research Ethics Committee (Protocol reference # 011-01-18), and the Zambia National Health Research Authority. All data were anonymised during the transcription process and securely stored on encrypted media.

3. Results

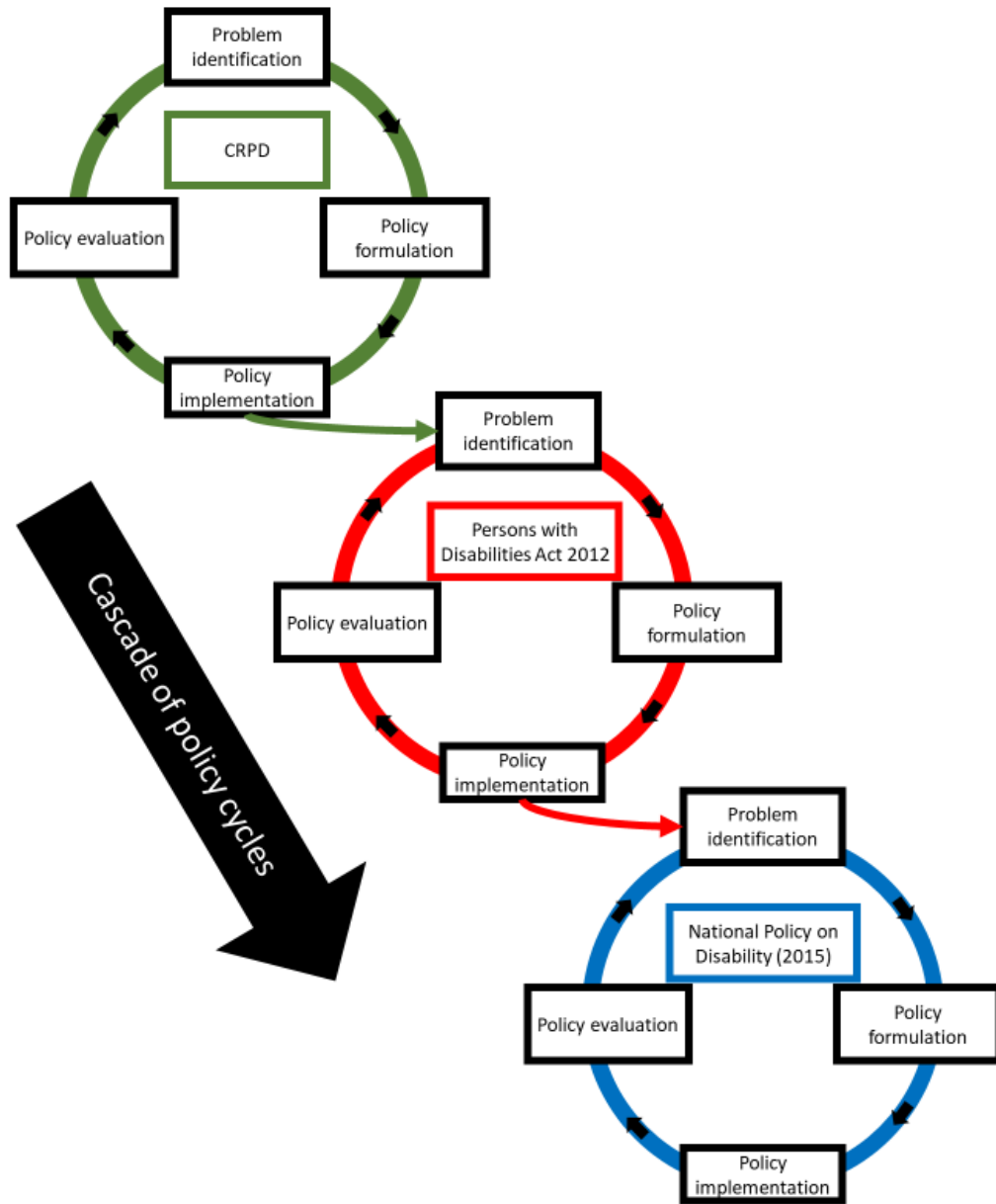
When asked open questions about disability legislation and policy in Zambia in the interviews, nearly all stakeholders spoke of the Persons with Disabilities Act and/or the National Policy on Disability.¹ Nonetheless, stakeholder perspectives were never confined to these policies. Instead, stakeholders would reference these documents in relation to topics such as policy advocacy activities, recent programmatic initiatives, particular sectors, or specific stages of the policy cycle (Jack, 2016). Multiple participants addressed the UNCRPD and the SDGs as part of their narratives, providing multiple perspectives of the ways that these international initiatives were reflected in the Zambian disability policy landscape.

3.1 The UNCRPD and the Zambian Disability Policy Landscape

In stakeholders' frequent references to the Act and the National Policy, these two were often linked together and connected to the UNCRPD. Taken collectively, the participants' perspectives could be summed up as follows: the domestication of the UNCRPD in Zambia has been enacted primarily through a "policy cascade." A visual representation of this cascade is presented in Figure 1 and verbally described as follows: the UNCRPD led to the 2012 update of the Persons with Disabilities Act, which in turn inspired the National Disability Policy.

¹ The interest of participating disability stakeholders in discussing the act and the policy should not be taken for granted: the interviews were designed to explore Zambian disability policy in general. Prior to beginning the interviews, it was unclear as to whether those disability-specific policies would be of greatest interest as compared to alternatives. Examples of potentially interesting alternatives include disability-relevant policies targeted at specific sectors (e.g., education, health, elections).

Figure 1: A Visual Representation of the "Policy Cascade" Instigated by the UNCRDP



It should be noted that individual stakeholders either described the entire cascade or only presented component parts. For example, according to one disability advocate, the director of a non-governmental organisation:

Through the government of Zambia; one, we have the actual Disability Policy, which was developed after Zambia ratified and domesticated UNCRPD... So after that, after the domestication, then the Disability Act was also formulated. Through that, of course, as civil

society organisations we know, 'no, this is not enough. We need also to have something, a document, to support our, our rights.' That's how the Disability Policy was also developed.

By contrast, other stakeholders presented sub-components that were still supportive of the linear cascade. One example was provided by a policymaker working in a ministry planning department, "So, what we've done as a country, as Zambia, we've domesticated the UNCRPD, UN Convention of Rights of people with disabilities into the Disability Act Number 6 of 2012." According to another policymaker, working as a desk officer in a ministry:

As you may be aware, we signed the UNCRPD. Yes. And for us to actually implement that, we need to have some course of action. That's how come that policy was developed, so that it could guide on how best we could mainstream disability in all sectors of government.

While participants generally shared the policymaker's impressions of Zambian disability policy formulation, many were sceptical about the extent to which the policies had been implemented. This position was nearly universal among disability advocates. According to one leader of a national DPO, "there is a Persons of Disabilities Act number 6 of 2012, this is law. That is good. So what the government needs to do is to implement." Another disability advocate, the leader of a different national DPO stated:

The National Policy on Disability is a very good document, in short. Which once implemented, funds being available, we can go a long way to reach out to everybody. Yes. Now as ... as DPOs, we still have a lot of worries, because of the way government is implementing it. We are not seeing serious commitment from government, in terms of resource mobilisation for them to implement the policy effectively.

While policymakers were more guarded in their statements about the lack of implementation, many shared a perspective that was similar to the disability advocates. One ministry employee presented a perspective on implementation together with an explanation of why it has been limited, "there has not been a lot of sensitisation of the policies. The policies are not bad. The laws are not bad. But then persons with disabilities, including line ministries, are not aware of these policies."

From the perspectives of disability policy stakeholders, it is clear that the Act and National Policy are important documents and that the formulation of these documents has occurred in a type of "policy cascade" that was initiated by the UNCRPD. While this policy cascade is important, its implementation remains incomplete, leaving unanswered questions about the relevance of these developments for Zambians with disabilities.

3.2 The SDGs and the Zambian Disability Policy Landscape

Disability policy stakeholders also referred to the SDGs in their accounts of Zambian disability policymaking. Participants who spoke of the SDGs described their domestication into Zambia's overall policy framework through the Seventh National Development Plan (7NDP) (Ministry of National Development Planning, 2017) while identifying in greater detail the attention paid to disability. These perspectives were exemplified by the leader of a disabled persons' organisation, who stated that, "Zambia is claiming to have mainstreamed the SDGs into the Seventh National Development plan, where they are embracing the principle of 'Leaving No One Behind.'" For this disability advocate, the combined influence of the SDGs and the 7NDP on disability issues was rhetorically commendable but with disappointing details: "there is a new volume for the Seventh National Development Plan, so we struggled to find places where disability was mentioned. Yeah, so you find that the disability part is only mentioned under the cluster for vulnerability."

The government of Zambia's embrace of the motto "Leave no one behind", inspired by the SDGs, was widely recognised among participants. Whereas the motto was frequently repeated, it was less common for participants to speak of the details of the SDGs or the 7NDP. The rhetorical and inspirational value of the motto in the absence of policy specifics was exemplified by a disability advocate, working for a non-governmental organisation engaged in a campaign to increase employment among persons with disabilities:

Interviewer: Was there the goal to use parts of the National Development Plan to influence the campaign or hoping to influence the plan. Like how did that relate?

Participant: It was really trying to influence the sector and our stakeholders based on the Seventh National Development Plan. Because I think that it is a tool that everybody has read. And I think that it is with the big tagline of "Leave nobody behind."

From this perspective, the motto, which participants alternatively cited in reference to the SDGs or the 7NDP, resonated as a moral foundation upon which to base other claims. For example, one disability advocate spoke about an as-of-yet unimplemented policy to increase the availability of sign language interpreters to support the provision of government services. When asked what information would support the implementation of this policy, the disability advocate replied, "No one should be left behind; all must be taken on board. For instance, in the Sustainable Development Goals, we must be all on the same level. No other group should be uplifted; the other downtrodden. No, we should be equal."

Whereas the pledge to "leave no one behind" was the participants' most frequent reference to the SDGs, there was one participant whose work was more directly informed by some of the 17 goals that comprise the SDGs. This participant was a youth disability advocate who, in explaining the foundations of his domestic partnerships and international financial support, stated that his "project in disability and human rights [was] twinned on the SDGs."

Accordingly, his mobilisation campaign was premised upon “three challenges, in comparing them with the three SDGs, which is 3, 4, and 8, which talk about health, education, and decent work.” For this participant, the focus created by the identification of specific development goals was valuable, allowing him to advocate more pointedly for the inclusion of youth with disabilities into Zambia’s overall development plans.

4. Discussion

Whereas disability policy stakeholders presented both the UNCRPD and the SDGs as international initiatives that are important to the domestic policy landscape, their influence was presented in very different ways. Study participants presented the UNCRPD as having been formally domesticated through a linear process with updated legislation and new policy. As we presented in Figure 1, if we use the policy cycle (Jack, 2016) as an organising framework, the linear process can be represented visually as a “policy cascade.” This description of the UNCRPD, the Act, and the National Policy relating to each other in a linear manner, is more straightforward than the descriptions provided in the National Policy (MCDMCH, 2015)² or in Zimba’s (2016) study on UNCRPD domestication.

In contrast to the stakeholders’ perspectives of a linear process initiated by the UNCRPD, they perceived the SDGs and their domestication through the 7NDP to have few direct effects on Zambian disability policy. Instead, their influence is rhetorical and inspirational, by providing disability advocates with a motto and structures (the 17 goals) that are broadly recognisable to the larger mainstream Zambian population.

In considering the effects of international initiatives on the Zambian disability policy landscape, it is useful to consider how the focus of the UNCRPD differs from that of the SDGs. While the purpose of the UNCRPD is disability-specific, the SDGs are applicable to the population at-large, albeit with a limited number of specific references to disability. The parallel interest of a disability-specific initiative and a disability-inclusive mainstream initiative is representative of the Twin Track Approach (Department for International Development (DFID), 2000). The Twin Track Approach is a way of conceptualising disability policy, programming, and advocacy. According to this approach, one “track” involves the mainstreaming of disability issues into all areas of policy, programming, and advocacy, while a parallel or twin “track” involves disability-specific actions. No participants made an explicit link between the Twin Track Approach and the parallel interest in the UNCRPD and the SDGs. Nonetheless, this concept may serve as a valuable way to consider the UNCRPD and the SDGs as complementary international influences on Zambia’s domestic disability policy landscape.

² The UNCRPD is explicitly mentioned in the National Policy on Disability in 1) the Minister’s Foreword, 2) the Rationale, 3) Networking and Partnership. The document also references the need for “the country to ratify relevant International Conventions” as part of the Legal Framework (page 27).

5. Conclusion

By exploring the perspectives of Zambian disability policy stakeholders, this study provides useful insight about the ways that policy stakeholders understand the interplay between international and domestic policy initiatives. The study has identified that international initiatives can be reflected onto the domestic disability landscape in ways that are more directly related to domestic policy documents (e.g., the reflection of the UNCRPD) or more rhetorical, inspiration, and broadly-applicable (e.g., the reflection of the SDGs). These findings can guide additional research on Zambia's evolving disability policy landscape.

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