

India disability: Inclusion and the power

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Context:

The inclusion of persons with disabilities into the economy can help boost global GDP between 3% to 7%.

Introduction:

1. Globally, 1.3 billion people (which is equivalent to nearly the entire population of India) live with some form of disability. Of them, 80% live in developing countries; further, 70% of them live in rural areas.
2. Current systems are designed for persons without disabilities and end up being exclusionary to people with disabilities, resulting in them experiencing higher instances of poverty, lack of access to education and opportunities, informality, and other forms of social and economic discrimination.

'For and By':

1. According to the English dictionary, "For" is often used when a person is receiving something and "By" is to "identify the agent performing an action".
2. This difference is crucial when it comes to disability inclusion, as the approach is completely different if it is "by" persons with disabilities being a part of the process and not "for" them, without them in the process.

A case for inclusion:

1. At the outset, the inclusion of persons with disabilities into the economy can help boost global GDP between 3% to 7%, as per the study by the International Labour Organization (ILO), "The price of exclusion: The economic consequences of excluding people with disabilities from the world of work".
2. We believe that everyone has the right to equal treatment and opportunities at work, agnostic of any attributes other than the ability to do the job. The reality, however, is mixed. The current employment scenario is limited, providing fewer jobs for persons with disabilities and perpetuating stereotypes that create further barriers for people with disabilities to access the labour market.
3. It is also in direct contravention of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which advocates changing attitudes and perceptions towards persons with disabilities and viewing inclusion from a social development dimension. Disability inclusion is rooted in assuring the rights of persons with disabilities and recognising the economic benefits of inclusion.

Challenges in rural areas:

1. In India, the Central and State governments have various schemes for persons with disabilities and a unique id for persons with disabilities (UDID) card, established as part of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016).
2. The first step is awareness to ensure last-mile connectivity of the benefits enumerated for people with disabilities by the government, which begins with the capacity-building of community leaders who can advocate for this at the grass-roots level.
3. This is especially important in rural areas, where persons with disabilities tend to face greater challenges when compared to their urban counterparts, with even more limited access to education and employment. Some developmental schemes, too, exclude them.
4. They are viewed as objects of charity and not as persons with agency with an ability to participate in decision-making processes.
5. Rural areas also have high agricultural dependence and face the heightened risk of climate calamities arising from rising sea levels, reduced access to clean water and food, hurricanes, heatwaves, and floods, with rural people at the frontlines of these challenges.
6. A bottom-up approach to disability inclusion is crucial to build productive pathways out of poverty and ensure that persons with disabilities are recognised as active members of society and the economy.
7. The private sector holds a key in promoting the employment of persons with disabilities. In addition to a robust legal framework, experience shows the importance of engaging the private sector and building the confidence of companies to hire and retain workers with disabilities.
8. Additionally, engagement of employers' federations, including those representing small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as with trade unions, has shown to have great potential to promote the employment of persons with disabilities.

The SPARK project:

1. The ILO and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), in collaboration with the Women's Development Corporation in Maharashtra, are implementing the Sparking Disability Inclusive Rural Transformation (SPARK) project.
2. Through this project, persons with disabilities were put in the lead, being identified from the villages, and trained as Disability Inclusion Facilitators (DIFs). The DIFs engage with the community, persons with disabilities, caregivers of persons with disabilities, women from self-help groups and other stakeholders to raise awareness about disability inclusion and barriers to inclusion.
3. The DIFs identify women with disabilities and mainstream them in existing self-help groups for social and economic development, where these women have been able to access funds to start an enterprise. The SPARK project has been able to bring an attitudinal shift towards persons with disabilities, right from the societal to administrative levels.

Conclusion:

1. The goal of social justice cannot be achieved without the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all spheres of development, starting with rural areas and rural resilience.
2. Evidence shows a bi-directional link to poverty, nutrition, and hunger, and as a consequence, there needs to be more inclusive opportunities and employment in rural areas.
3. Given the historic marginalisation of persons with disabilities and the backsliding of the progress on the Sustainable Development Goals, a fundamental shift in commitment, solidarity, financing, and action is critical. It is about time that the voices and needs of persons with disabilities be prioritised at the centre of the global development agenda.