Ensuring inclusive services for children & adolescents: Leaving no one behind!

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It has been 7 years now since the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and 133 countries have ratified it so far.

While, it is encouraging to see that countries are ratifying the Convention, and we seem to be inching towards universal ratification, all the goodness of the CRPD is only as good as its implementation.

The world today has 1 billion people with disabilities, of which 800 million live in countries of the global South. Many of these 800 million live in abject poverty fighting discrimination every single day of their life. I have always maintained that the true meaning of CRPD will be realised only when we are able to reach these millions of people in the remotest corners of the world.

We are talking about children with disabilities here. Let me give you an example from India, where I am from.

70-100 million people with disabilities live in India, of which maybe 25-35 million are children with disabilities. Let me share my own story of growing up as a child with a disability in a small town in northern India. If it were not for the efforts of my parents, I would not have been able to go to a regular school or get whatever little, good, bad, ugly early intervention I received. Despite all this, the first time I heard the word ‘rehabilitation’ was when my father spent his life’s savings to take me to the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago.

Let’s talk about rights a little later. Let’s first talk about the cycle of events that follows the birth of child with disability or a child acquiring a disability.

When a child is born with a disability in countries like India and others in the global South, the family is left helpless. The immediate intervention that is required at this point is for a trained person to come and counsel the parents, make them understand the disability of their child and the simple fact that disability does not mean that their child cannot lead a regular independent life. The second requirement is for early intervention so that the child learns to be friends with her/his disability and learns to be independent, gets to go to a regular school, gets to go and play with other children and has as regular a childhood as is possible. Sadly, this isn’t the case. More often than not, a disability is not even identified for very long.

Are these very basic services available in our countries? The answer is no. Whatever little services, if at all, are available in just the metros and big cities.

Recently, there was a news story about a little boy who lost his upper limbs and left leg in an electrocution accident. He seems to be adapting to his disability, learning to use his toes, etc. But the story ends with how he is made to think that his limbs are ‘growing to grow back again’ because his mother has told him so. I dread to think what this little boy will go through when he realizes in due course that it is not going
to happen! This reflects the state of affairs in a province bordering the National Capital Region of India.

The problem here lies in the fact that we do not have systems where parents can go to when something like this happens. And it is not if there are no services available for children in India. The country is spending huge amounts of money in childcare starting from birth to children already in schools. While the country spends a huge amount on preventing disability, it spends a tragically small amount on services for children who have a disability! What is needed is for ALL childhood intervention services to be inclusive of children with disabilities. Not only that, the state has to ensure that there are adequate number of trained personnel that will provide early intervention facilities for children with disabilities. As of now, there is a huge dearth of such professionals.

The total number of registered professionals in India is approximately 35,000. This includes all professionals along with special educators. Most of them are ‘trained’ by NGOs. The math is frightening! Majority of them are based in big cities and are on the lookout for better paying jobs abroad. Those who are poorly trained remain and get poorly paid jobs, potentially causing more harm than good.

That unfortunately is how big the gap is.

Thus, it is not a surprise that less than 2 percent of children with disabilities in India are receiving any kind of education, be it in mainstream schools, special schools or even home schooling. Since, they are not reaching the schools, there are even lesser number of students with disabilities in colleges and universities. A huge percentage of our demographic dividend, our human resource is thus relegated to a life of dependence, denied their right to have a fulfilling life in society, denied their right to contribute to the growth of their nations! The cost of keeping children with disabilities away from the mainstream is huge and any nation that is committed towards growth and development will realise that it makes much more sense to make sure that all its citizens are given the opportunity to contribute to the society’s growth.

The CRPD is not the only Convention that talks about children with disabilities. We often seem to forget that the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in article 23 explicitly mentions the rights of children with disabilities to healthcare, education, recreation, etc. Article 2 of CRC also mandates that States must ensure all the rights enshrined in the Convention to all children irrespective of factors such as race, gender, ethnicity and disability.

However, policies and schemes on children tend to overlook this. Even people from civil society working in the area of child rights tend to overlook this!

Tajikistan has not ratified CRPD but it has ratified CRC and I humbly urge upon the government to please ensure that children with disabilities are provided equal access to all services for children and adolescents.

We have to understand and imbibe it in all our systems that children with disabilities are children first. They have an equal right to all early childhood services, education, recreation, healthcare, etc. that is available to children without disabilities. If we do not do that, we are denying millions of children the right to a fulfilling childhood, right to a bright future and denying their right to contribute to their society and nation. It is as much a loss for our society as it is a loss for them, or maybe even more.
Ensuring that all your policies for children are inclusive of children with disabilities is therefore, the first step in ensuring that we are tapping the huge human resource available to us, which will in the future contribute significantly towards our societies. This is a requirement with or without ratifying CRPD. But, ratifying the Convention will be a strong step towards achieving a truly inclusive society and showing your country’s commitment towards its disabled citizens.

The current flavor in the development world is ‘leaving no one behind’.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the only way to achieve this is when we ensure that our programmes and schemes are reaching the most marginalized and the most vulnerable, which includes people with disabilities, and in particular children with disabilities.

Thank you!