

# Just Not Good Enough in 2015

## Global Response to HIV/AIDS among People with Disabilities

The intersection of World AIDS Day on Dec 1, and the World Disability Day on Dec 3, provides opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of the global AIDS response for the 1 billion people, 15% of the world's population,<sup>i</sup> who live with a physical, sensory (i.e. blindness, deafness), intellectual or mental health impairment. Unfortunately, there is little encouraging to report.

Disability compounds risks associated with HIV/AIDS. Every risk factor for HIV/AIDS –poverty, restricted access to education and employment, increased rates of violence and social isolation, are also risk factors faced by people with disabilities.<sup>ii</sup> People with disabilities are as likely as all other members of society to be sexually active, and are at equal or increased risk from drugs and alcohol. Additionally, they often face stigma and prejudice because of traditional beliefs and practices. While at equal or increased risk for becoming HIV positive they are far less likely to receive needed AIDS education, medical care, social or economic support.<sup>iii</sup> Additionally, people living with HIV are at risk of becoming disabled based on their illness and treatment.<sup>iv</sup>

Arguably a greater barrier than stigma and prejudice is ignorance of what it means to live with a disability. Need for greater awareness extends to government and public health officials, health providers and community outreach workers, the very people charged with ensuring that HIV education and services, and more broadly, sexual and reproductive health, universal health coverage and gender-based violence programmes, reach everyone.

In recent years, disability issues have gained traction on the world stage. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities now ratified by 159 countries ensures that people with disabilities must be included in all global development and health initiatives, although implementation lags far behind new legal assurances.<sup>v</sup> The Sustainable Development Goals not only include people with disabilities in the introduction and several targets, but importantly promise to 'leave no one behind.'

True, there is some progress. Since the XVII International AIDS Conference (2008), there has been one disability table and panel at each subsequent AIDS conference along with several supportive conversations between UNAIDS officials and disability groups. In 2009, UN agencies produced a Policy Brief;<sup>vi</sup> in 2014, UNAIDS issued a short report.<sup>vii</sup> Significantly UNAIDS produced a Strategy Brief<sup>viii</sup> but this unfortunately, was never finalized or circulated. Most disappointingly, despite efforts from the global disability community to provide input, the UNAIDS Fast Track Strategy 2016-2020<sup>ix</sup> mentions disability only twice in a list of 'issues', but it is unclear how this inclusion can be operationalized.

Nor is UNAIDS alone. Major donors such as PEPFAR and the Global Fund have no disability focus. Major reports, including the recent UNAIDS-Lancet Commission, neglect to mention disabled populations.<sup>x</sup> Likewise, only a few programmes have been initiated by civil society,<sup>xi</sup> but consistent inclusion of people with disabilities in national and international HIV programmes is unknown. Review

of the global health literature (1990-2012) located only 124 publications on any aspect of disability and HIV/AIDS.<sup>xii</sup>

This is a lost opportunity. Thirty-five years into a global pandemic, lack of inclusion by leading AIDS organisations, a handful of publications, and a few disability-specific interventions, is just not good enough. Disability, like gender, should be a key consideration in all HIV/AIDS and SRH efforts, particularly in light of the new SDG's call to 'leave no one behind.'

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<sup>i</sup> WHO/World Bank. 2011. World Disability Report. Geneva: WHO. [http://www.who.int/disabilities/world\\_report/2011/en/](http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/en/)

<sup>ii</sup> World Bank. 2004. A Population at Risk: HIV/AIDS and Disability: Capturing Hidden Voices. Washington, DC: The World Bank. <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DISABILITY/Resources/Health-and-Wellness/HIVAIDS.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> World Health Organization, *ibid*

<sup>iv</sup> Hanass-Hancock J, Regondi I, Van Egeraat L, Nixon S. 2013. HIV-related disability in HIV hyper-endemic countries: A scoping review. *World Journal of AIDS*, 3, 257-279.

<sup>v</sup> United Nations. 2006. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>

<sup>vi</sup> UN Human Rights/ WHO/ UN AIDS. 2009. Disability and HIV Policy Brief. [http://data.unaids.org/pub/Manual/2009/jc1632\\_policy\\_brief\\_disability\\_en.pdf](http://data.unaids.org/pub/Manual/2009/jc1632_policy_brief_disability_en.pdf)

<sup>vii</sup> UN AIDS. 2014. Gap Report: People with Disabilities. [http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media\\_asset/11\\_Peoplewithdisabilities.pdf](http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/11_Peoplewithdisabilities.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> Hanass-Hancock J, Chappell P, Pretorius L. 2014. Discussion Paper on UNAIDS Strategy Brief for Integrating Disability into AIDS Programming. Durban: IDDC and HEARD.

<sup>ix</sup> UN AIDS 2015. On the Fast Track to Ends AIDS: 2016-2021 Strategy. [http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media\\_asset/20151027\\_UNAIDS\\_PCB37\\_15\\_18\\_EN\\_rev1.pdf](http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/20151027_UNAIDS_PCB37_15_18_EN_rev1.pdf)

<sup>x</sup> UNAIDS-Lancet Commission. 2015. Defeating AIDS—Advancing Global Health. *Lancet*. 386:171-218

<sup>xi</sup> Mac-Seing, M. 2014. Including disability in HIV policy and programming: Good practices drawn from country-based evidence. Lyon: Handicap International. [http://www.hiproweb.org/uploads/tx\\_hidrtdocs/DisabilityAndHIV\\_LL07.pdf](http://www.hiproweb.org/uploads/tx_hidrtdocs/DisabilityAndHIV_LL07.pdf)

<sup>xii</sup> Groce N, Pohleder P, Eide A., MacLachlan M, Mall S, Swartz L. (2013) HIV issues and People with Disabilities: A Review and Agenda for Research. *Social Science and Medicine*. 77: 31–40.