Building an inclusive society

Experiences
from the field

Voices for
inclusion

Diverse people, same rights

Inclusive development. A term that is mentioned in a lot of policies and papers, but in practice it is fairly complex. Several rightsholders groups get excluded from development processes and their voices are unheard. The Voices for Inclusion project focused on learning between rightsholders groups facing marginalization in five countries (Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Nigeria, Indonesia and The Philippines) and researched whether advocacy can be more effective by increasing the mutual understanding between different rightsholders groups, so they can jointly raise their voice for inclusion. Here is where intersectionality comes in: different vulnerable identities can be overlapping, both within groups and between groups. Becoming aware of the overlaps may lead to recognizing shared values and creating joint advocacy messages for better laws and policies in line with international conventions, inclusive budget allocation at local and national level, social accountability for the recognition of human rights and more awareness and support in the communities and the society.

This booklet describes 5 lessons learned from the Voices for Inclusion project. Some lessons are focusing more on the strategy for doing advocacy, while other lessons are focusing on the principle of intersectionality when advocating for inclusion. We hope these insights give you inspiration for improving your own advocacy work.

Together we can strive for a more inclusive society worldwide.

Advocacy

The aim of advocacy is to influence decisions for improvement in legislation, economics, social systems and institutions for a specific target group. To that end, advocacy includes many activities that a person, organisation or coalition of organisations can undertake, including awareness-raising sessions, media campaigns, public speaking, meetings with power holders, participation in an advisory board, commissioning and publishing research and signing a petition.

The ultimate goal of advocacy is to trigger transformation for sustainable, systemic change in society. This implies a change of policies and practices and ensuring these policies are implemented effectively, in our case for breaking down the attitudinal, policy and physical barriers for people with a disability.

Advocacy is also about giving voice or power (empower) to those people with little power so they will be able to defend their interests and rights. When rightsholders facing marginalization are doing the advocacy, we talk about self-advocacy. Self-advocacy by people who used to be excluded is an important indicator for empowerment.

In the Voices for Inclusion project, we have seen many different advocacy practices performed by the participating organisations. We would like to highlight three of our insights gained from these organisations.

Sharing personal stories via digital media

Many people do not understand the complexity of marginalization among different youth groups, especially persons living with disabilities, HIV, SOGIESC, LGBTQIA+ youth and persons with lived experiences (mental health). Misinformation is among the major problems to feed stigma and prejudice towards these youth. There are not enough venues for marginalized youth groups to forge deeper understanding by sharing their stories.

Vitualahan and LoveLife, two organisations in The Philippines, present an engaging conversation on these sensitive themes via personal stories that are shared via digital media. These organisations let people themselves explain their stories of who they are and what they experience in their lives, rather than having an expert talk about the topic on an abstract level. For example, an online talk show with stories from students from the lens of their own lived experiences was live-streamed via Facebook. At times, several support groups like the Autism Society of the Philippines were also invited to help explain to people what (in this case) autism is in a clear and concise way. When these organisations decided to move everything online and expand the demographics, they achieved results that were thought to be impossible.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Be creative in creating your advocacy strategies and see entertainment as an efficient tool to engage. For example, organize a community gathering through a celebratory festival.
- Leverage technology and maximize its equalizing potential.
- Embrace co-creation with your community.

Role of traditional and religious leaders

In many societies stigma and prejudices are one of the major underlying causes for exclusion of groups, such as people with disabilities and the LGBTIQ community. Reflecting upon the existing perceptions and beliefs can therefore be an effective advocacy strategy for inclusion. When analysing the good practices from the Voices for Inclusion participants, it became clear that there is a distinct role for religious and traditional leaders in the fight against stigma and prejudice.

Religious and traditional beliefs have framed personal and societal values in the communities/cities. Strong views of religious leaders on LGBTIQ are common in most of the project countries. For example, most Nigerians believe that sexual matters are private and should not be discussed openly, and both dominant religious groups in Nigeria preach against same sex relationships.

LESSONS LEARNED

Traditional and religious leaders are often very powerful in their communities. The approach of these leaders can determine whether certain groups are accepted or get stigmatized. In Rwanda, it was discussed that religious leaders can therefore play a crucial role in eradicating the stigma as well. They could for example preach about equality and equity, use a human rights based approach as they move down to families and communities to be able to treat all equally and carry out effective advocacy with decision and policy makers through presentation of real issues/ problems that they have identified during their community-based preaching and home visits.

Empowerment through self-advocacy

Organisations of all five countries involved in the Voices for Inclusion project plead for the inclusion of (representatives of) marginalized groups in advocacy actions for several reasons: it increases the effectiveness of the advocacy as those advocates live what they are advocating for and they are very dynamic and committed to the case. Participants from Rwanda also indicate that it is more cost-efficient, as it is a cheaper way of advocating. The impact goes beyond the direct results of advocacy: it leads to empowerment of the target group and a more continuous and sustainable force of advocacy of target-group led organizations.

Putting this in practice, the participating organisations from Nigeria insist on the representativeness of marginalized groups in governing bodies. One of them works through paralegals that can provide first aid legal support. Indonesia insists on bottom-up advocacy: the lowest government level is in direct contact with their minority citizens which makes them easily understood, so policies will become more inclusive. At the same time, advocacy must address the next level of government because they have the political power to drive change and to make policies that support the implementation and scaling-up of inclusive villages.

Sierra Leone mentions the linking up of marginalized groups to networks that have a stronger voice and to give voice to marginalized or stigmatized people within groups and organizations. They insist on the use of appropriate communication methods (local radio, community meetings) in order to increase legitimacy and credibility. Also combining advocacy to appropriate service delivery can lead to more awareness at community level.

For changing mindsets towards more inclusiveness, one has to start close by - for example with parents in case of children with a disability - and gradually increase the circle: neighbours, community members, local leaders.

Despite the opportunities of self-advocacy, including people with mental/intellectual disabilities is often seen as a challenge. Rwanda mentions the raising of awareness and economic empowerment of the parents of children with (severe) impairments as a good option.
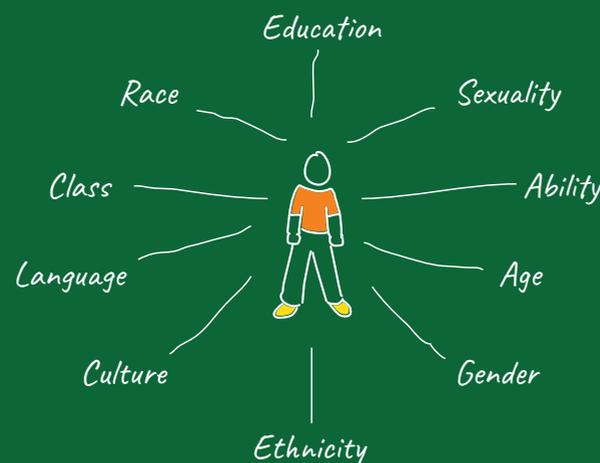
LESSONS LEARNED

NGO's must be aware of the triple advantages of self-advocacy:
• bringing across the message;
• empowering vulnerable people and groups;
• creating a sustainable advocacy force.

To achieve this, start small, and build advocacy from grassroots' level upwards.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is defined as the interaction between different factors such as gender, race, age, disability, ethnicity and other categories of social difference in individual lives and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power[1]. The intersectional approach offers a way to understand how these different factors intersect to shape individual identities, thereby enhancing awareness of people's needs, interests, capacities and experiences.

Education
Race
Sexuality
Class
Ability
Language
Age
Culture
Gender
Ethnicity

Social groups are neither homogenous nor static, and intersectional approaches recognize this complexity by taking historical, social, economic, cultural and political contexts into account. Intersectionality acknowledges that belonging to multiple disadvantaged groups or identities compounds and complicates experiences of oppression in different contexts, which can entail greater legal, social or cultural barriers.

[1] Davis. (2008). "Intersectionality as buzzword: a sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory useful". Feminist Theory 9(1): 67-85

An issue-based approach to inclusion leaves more space for intersectionality than an identity-based approach

Advocacy actions can be framed as issue-focused or identity-focused. Issue-focused could be specific issues like access to employment, while an identity focus is more about a certain group, such as persons with a disability. By focusing on inclusion on a specific issue, organisations can identify which groups are excluded in this issue, and are therefore able to address the needs of multiple marginalized communities. They could do so by creating alliances with organisations working on inclusion for these groups.

On the contrary, many advocacy groups striving for inclusion tend to focus on a single identity. By doing so, organisations might not be able to see nor address the diversity of identities (and so: the diverse needs) within the group they aim to represent.

Identities of a person can also be competing. These competing (marginalized) identities come from the reality that people experience marginality at different levels and there are few opportunities to explore all of these identities. People therefore get torn between two identities that are equally important to them.

If one truly wants to work towards inclusion, the understanding of intersectionality is essential for choosing the approach that suits the people that get excluded. In the Voices for Inclusion project, research was done to better understand how this concept can be used for advocacy for inclusion. The following two lessons were learned during the project:

2   Inclusion has to be intentional

Advocacy actions, to be truly intersectional, have to recognize the diversity within each community. However, advocacy that is inclusive for diverse identities facing marginalization is not an automatic process. There has to be an awareness of its importance and a conscious effort by advocacy practitioners to represent the diversity within the community they represent. For this to happen, it is not unusual that advocacy practitioners will have to revise their own assumptions and beliefs regarding different marginalized groups. Assumptions or negative beliefs around gender or sexual orientation for example, can be limiting factors to conducting intersectional advocacy. In this sense, spaces like those created by the Voices for Inclusion project can serve well for advocacy practitioners to revise their own assumptions and broaden their views on diversity, marginality and advocacy.

TIPS TO USE AN INTERSECTIONAL LENS

The Accessibility, Communication, Attitude and Participation (ACAP) framework has been developed by Mission East Nepal[2] and reflects on 6 domains of exclusion: ability, gender, ethnicity, economic development and geography. This framework can be used as a tool to ensuring that nobody is left behind in any (issue-focused) intervention or advocacy action. A project or a programme that addresses the topics in the framework is likely to be successful in recognizing diversity, removing barriers and ensuring participation of all. The questions below are guiding questions that help to assess the inclusiveness of your own projects and programmes[3].

[2] Van Ek & Schot. (2017). Towards inclusion: A guide for organisations and practitioners.
[3] Van Ek & Schot (2017). In: Chaplin, Twigg & Lovell. (2019). Intersectional approaches to vulnerability reduction and resilience-building. *Resilience Intel*, Issue no. 12.

ACAP-Framework - Some guiding questions

Accessibility:

- **Do project activities lead to removal of barriers?**
- **Do practices address causes of exclusion?**
- **Do they lead to relevant actions?**
- **Are they supportive of an enabling environment?**
- **Will they be sustained?**

Attitude:

- **Does the project recognize there are different people with different characteristics?**
- **Does it recognize**
  - **That people face different issues?**
  - **That they face different barriers?**
  - **And that people have different strengths?**

Communication:

- **Do all people understand the messages delivered through project activities?**
- **Are messages accessible by all?**
- **Are messages conveyed properly and in acceptable language?**
- **Will they lead to desired actions?**

Participation:

- **Can (and do) all people participate in all stages of the project, including decision-making?**
- **Do they have a voice?**
- **Are they active?**
- **Are their decisions accepted and incorporated?**

This project was made possible
by the contributions of the following organizations: