

Nepal: For persons with disabilities from minority and indigenous communities, the greatest barrier to accessing assistive technologies is discrimination

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An indigenous woman with a disability living near forest areas in Nepal. She has been denied basic rights provided by the government because her family is not familiar with government procedures and lacks access to information.

Courtesy of Pratima Gurung

Though the estimated 370 million indigenous people worldwide are extraordinarily diverse, spanning some 5,000 languages and cultural groups, they have one unfortunate commonality – a long history of injustice. The difficulties they face range from limited political participation and economic inequality to lack of infrastructure and inappropriate education.

For indigenous persons with disabilities, however, the challenges are even more acute: in their case, the risks of physical inaccessibility, social stigma and related issues such as discrimination in employment opportunities are heightened by racism. Furthermore, indigenous women with disabilities may be confronted with added barriers around gender, including not only the threat of violence and abuse from non-indigenous groups but also restrictive roles and expectations within their own communities.

Unsurprisingly, despite the many potential benefits that technologies can bring, the relationship between indigenous persons with disabilities and technologies has been complicated by power imbalances, stereotypes and limited political will. 'Technology' is a broad term and assistive technologies are no exception, encompassing something as simple as a white cane to the latest computer software. It can be as fundamental as the ability to access comprehensible information in one's own language. Yet in all these cases,

even when the technology in question is low-cost or guaranteed as a basic human right, in practice it may be unaffordable or inaccessible for many indigenous persons with disabilities.

At an international level, the importance of information and communications technologies (ICTs) for indigenous peoples was only officially recognized in 2003 in the Geneva Declaration of the Global Forum of Indigenous Peoples and the Information Society. The Global Forum highlighted that ICTs should be used to support and encourage cultural diversity and to preserve and promote the languages, distinct identities and traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples, nations and tribes, and in a manner to determine the best advances towards these goals. But to this day, the use of ICTs remains low in many indigenous communities and they are not generally viewed as active users. For indigenous persons with disabilities, the problems of paternalism and negative perceptions about their capacity to engage with advanced technologies have been reinforced by similar assumptions with regards to disability.

Access to appropriate technologies for persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups can deliver wide ranging benefits, fostering equality, non-discrimination and participation in society. With new generations of screen reading software for those who are blind or visually impaired, improved mobility devices such as wheelchairs for physically disabled users and other assistive technologies, the potential to transform the lives of the millions of indigenous persons with disabilities in developing countries is immense. Yet access to technology continues to be characterized by a growing gap between those who are technology-rich and those who are technology-poor, in the process deepening the existing disparities between dominant groups and those belonging to marginalized groups, including indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities.

Barriers for accessing technology

Nepal is no exception to the troubling pattern of exclusion that shapes indigenous and disabled access to technologies at a global level. There are many factors that contribute to the high levels of disability among indigenous peoples and other marginalized communities, such as Dalits, living in rural areas of Nepal. Besides facing an increased exposure to risks such as environmental degradation, climate change impacts, natural disasters, conflict, violence, dangerous working conditions and accidents including in foreign employment, they also suffer poverty, lower standards of health, inadequate nutrition and a lack of suitable rehabilitation services, meaning that in the event of an

accident or debilitating illness they are less likely to recover from its effects.

This was especially evident in the wake of the 2015 earthquake that devastated significant areas of Nepal, with reports of indigenous peoples and Dalits being sidelined from emergency relief. This reflected a broader context of exclusion from public life: a survey undertaken for the United Nations Development Programme in its wake found that 81 per cent of indigenous persons with disabilities and 61.6 per cent of Dalit persons with disabilities stated that they had 'inadequate or poor' access to public facilities, compared to 42.2 per cent among persons with disabilities belonging to other ethnic or caste groups.

In Nepal, perhaps the greatest obstacle to securing the assistive technologies that could change their lives is deep-seated prejudice. 'Many persons with disabilities from indigenous communities, religious groups and

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minorities experience multiple layers of discrimination based on their identities and social categories,' says Jamuna Tamang of the National Indigenous Disabled Women Association Nepal (NIDWAN). These occur at every level, says Tamang, and 'are direct barriers that impact the daily lives and the social, economic and physical aspects of indigenous peoples with disabilities.' Broadly summarized by Tamang, these include:

- **Lack of access to information:** 'Even if there are provisions for receiving assistive devices for persons with disabilities, those may not reach indigenous peoples, as the information circulates in urban settings, within networks of a few Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) to which most marginalized groups may not have access.'
- **Administrative hurdles:** 'The procedural requirements may represent more barriers since the documentations and forms may not be provided in accessible formats and appropriate languages. Forms, recommendations, information on rights, procedures for applications, follow up, time frames and legal formalities remain challenges for individuals from these groups as most are not familiarized with institutional and legal structures.'
- **Physical distance:** 'Geographical remoteness is also an obstacle for indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities as travelling to a headquarters or city and going through procedures can take several days and is costly.'

- **Unaffordability:** 'These groups may not be able to afford technologies because of the high costs, maintenance requirements and lack of training and literacy. The absence of initiatives to educate people in this regard can be compounded by the limited information technology infrastructure available for indigenous peoples in rural areas.'

- **Culturally inappropriate technologies:** 'If people manage to have access to the technology, they might still not be able to use it properly due to the lack of a disability, social and cultural friendly environment. For example, the wheelchair provided might not be the right size or according to the needs of the disability, or environment and cultural friendly. During our home visits, we have noticed wheelchairs used for keeping clothes and pots and crutches used for chasing chickens in the fields.'

Indigenous peoples and religious or ethnic minorities such as Dalits may also encounter cultural, attitudinal and structural barriers in accessing assistive devices or disability services. After the 2015 earthquake, one of NIDWAN's members went to ask for assistive devices for her husband. She was told to write an application and submit it to the local government office near her community. When she went to the office, she was told to wear a formal dress and speak properly while demanding those services from officials. Belonging to an indigenous community she was wearing a lungi, a form of community attire, and was speaking a mix of indigenous Tamang and some Nepali, which was

understood. But though the officers could understand her request, she was told to come in proper dress, speak correctly and denied the services she needed. After that, she no longer felt like going to the office again to request any further assistance.

Unfortunately, her story is far from an isolated case. Indifference and poor treatment of indigenous and minority communities in Nepal are commonplace, though rarely discussed openly. The power dynamics become ubiquitous and this applies at all levels, even in OPDs, with even persons with disabilities from majority groups denying the issues faced by persons with disabilities from indigenous peoples or minorities. Furthermore, what aids are available are often not suited to the environment in which indigenous communities live. Disability equipment often has an extremely low durability and is difficult to repair locally, so most people living in rural areas use assistive devices that are locally made. Very few homes are accessible for persons with disabilities, which leaves them completely dependent on family members. This increases their social, political and economic marginalization and limits their access to necessary and appropriate support and services.

According to Yub Raj Lama, a visually impaired member of NIDWAN Youth Group, language availability is another significant factor. Having been raised in the city, he himself understands Nepali, the official language of the country, and therefore is able to access all of the facilities available. These assistive technologies are only available in mainstream or majority languages, however: even if these

services are provided to indigenous communities, they are unable to use them since most, besides being unfamiliar with the technology, do not speak mainstream Nepali. Like Yub Raj, many visually impaired persons belonging to indigenous communities in Nepal are now looking for ways to exploit these technologies, but as they remain unavailable in their own languages there is a danger that they will become yet another area of their lives where they are forced to assimilate to the cultural and linguistic context of the majority population.

Opportunities and ways forward

There is currently a dearth of information, a lack of documentation and limited debate on the role of ICTs to ensure the full inclusion of persons with disabilities belonging to indigenous peoples or minorities. Issues of gender have provided a conceptual framework, and the subject of double discrimination has been recognized in the disability movement and discourse. However, a fully multiple and intersectional lens related to caste, ethnicity, geography and class has still to be discussed or applied to different aspects of health, employment, technology and other services. Most available research studies and reports do not reflect intersectional perspectives. People who readily have access to ICTs are those who routinely frame any understanding of their role in society, meaning they determine how it is ultimately perceived.

In its 2018 Concluding Observations on Nepal, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

(CRPD) urged that the government 'strengthen measures, including public procurement, to grant access for all persons with disabilities... to information and communications technologies, and to low-cost software and assistive devices.' The CRPD also emphasized the importance of inclusion to engage in education and livelihood activities, for instance by granting access to affordable mobility aids and assistive devices, technologies and services necessary for the unrestricted personal mobility of all persons with disabilities, including those living in rural areas, and belonging to indigenous peoples and minorities. Usefully, the CRPD directly addressed issues pertaining to situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies, where the government should adopt 'an accessible communication strategy (including hotlines, a text message warning application and general manuals in sign language and Braille) and a comprehensive emergency strategy and protocols for situations of disaster and risk.' Throughout, the CRPD emphasized the importance of consultation with persons with disabilities through their representative organizations.

These Concluding Observations have opened up avenues and opportunities for both stakeholders to demand and duty bearers to ensure the comprehensive provision of suitable ICTs for all persons with disabilities, including those belonging to minority and indigenous communities.

Conclusion

Reframing the narratives of technology to make it cost effective, geographically inclusive and culturally accessible, as well as increasing literacy and knowledge of technologies at a wider level, is crucial if the large numbers of currently underserved persons with disabilities belonging to indigenous peoples and minorities are to be reached. This includes ensuring that technological information can be explained in terms and language that local communities can understand to enable them to introduce it into their daily lives. An intersectional understanding of the systemic and structural barriers faced by indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups is necessary to deliver truly inclusive health care, employment and other services. With this in mind, technology needs to be considered in a holistic and culturally appropriate manner to make sure that no one truly is left behind.