



We are able!

Policy brief: The role of religious norms and religious actors in disability inclusion



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Introduction: Why religion?

The goal of We are Able! is to contribute to more inclusive societies in which everyone has access to basic resources. According to the Theory of Change, this does not only require inclusive laws and policies, but also inclusive norms and practices. However, changing norms and practices is challenging because stigmatizing ideas and behaviours are usually deeply ingrained in societies. The aim of this research project is to investigate the role that religion could play in challenging these norms and promoting more inclusive communities. There are a number of reasons to consider religion as an important factor in this process:

- ❖ Religion is a fundamental part of people's lives. The large majority of the populations in the program countries is religious and this shapes their view of the world to a large extent.
- ❖ The ideas that underlie norms and behaviour related to people with disabilities are influenced by religion, both in positive and in negative ways.
- ❖ Religious leaders and institutions have a lot of authority and are able to reach a broad audience. They have a significant impact on the ideas of their constituents and are a key actor in civil society.

This research project therefore takes religion as a starting point to search for ways to create more inclusive societies. This policy brief presents the findings and conclusions of the research project and also provides recommendations for the We are Able! program.

Findings

Religious traditions on disability

Many of the ideas about people with disabilities can be found throughout the different religious traditions. All traditions contain ideas that are stigmatizing towards people with disabilities, as well as ideas that promote dignity and inclusion of people with disabilities. Some of the beliefs from traditional African religion, for instance about the connection between disability and witchcraft or punishment for sin, have become entangled with Christianity and Islam.

Christianity

- ❖ Being compassionate with the valuable members of community
- ❖ People with disabilities are created in the image of God
- ❖ Limits are part of human experience
- ❖ Disability needs to be cured
- ❖ People with disabilities as objects of pity/charity

Islam

- ❖ Disabilities as part of human nature
- ❖ Alleviations for religious duties (prayer, fasting etc.)
- ❖ Guardianship, social responsibility towards people with disabilities
- ❖ Disability as the will of God or as a test

"African religion"

- ❖ Disability as an affliction, should be remedied through traditional therapies
- ❖ Disability as a result of witchcraft or sin
- ❖ Ubuntu: community and human dignity
- ❖ Person with a disability as 'given by God'



Role of religion in stigma

In the model of health stigma, cultural norms (which includes religion) is listed among the drivers and facilitators of stigma. In other words, religious norms constitute a factor that determines whether or not stigmatization takes place. It is one of the root causes of stigma, and therefore hard to eradicate. Furthermore, since stigma is an intersectional phenomenon, people with disabilities are also impacted by religious or cultural norms on race, gender and sexuality. Studies in sub-Saharan African have shown that religion is a major factor in shaping the perception of people with disabilities. For instance, if people believe that disability is a result of sin or a curse, they are less likely to associate with people with disabilities.

At the same time, religion can also challenge these norms and promote a more inclusive approach towards people with disabilities. Religion can provide legitimization for certain social behaviour, by granting sacred authority to it. If religious leaders criticize certain stigmatizing norms, this can have a significant impact in the community. In this way, religious actors can be agents of social transformation, by communicating inclusive messages to their audience. There are many examples of development project in which religion was taken into account in order to change social norms around controversial topics. For instance, the involvement of religious leaders in campaigns against child marriage or FGM can lend moral authority to such campaigns.

Religion in We are Able!

In the We are Able! proposal, annual plans and annual reports, explicit mentions of religion are scarce. At the same time, however, an important objective of We are Able! is to change stigmatizing norms and behaviour. In order to achieve this, key stakeholders and role models need to be involved. This message is reiterated in the policy brief on the Scoping Studies, which stated that awareness raising is crucial and that this could involve religious actors. Furthermore, certain religious norms are mentioned as obstacles to inclusion.

In the interviews, We are Able! staff also emphasized the importance of engaging with religion as a key factor in inclusion. Religious actors are considered to be key stakeholders, as important actors in civil society and as 'moral voices' in the public sphere. Religious leaders have a large platform and have a lot of authority among their followers. They are also well-connected in the community and speak local languages. They are able to reach decision makers because of their connections on regional or national levels, and also because these decision makers are part of religious communities themselves. Religion is also an important source of hope and encouragement of people with disabilities. By becoming more inclusive, churches, mosques and other religious institutions can be an example of the way in which people with disabilities should be approached.

In many cases, religious actors are already involved in the We are Able! program. Through existing ties, religious leaders are invited for trainings or are involved in forums. They play a role in communicating the message of the program to their communities. However, this engagement of religious actors is not always reported as such. Furthermore, it is not included in the We are Able! strategies or policy documents. This means that cooperation with religious actors is currently not intentional or strategic.



Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

- ❖ Religion is a crucial factor in changing stigmatizing norms and behaviour. Religious actors are key stakeholders in creating awareness about disability inclusion.
- ❖ Currently, religious norms and religious actors are not intentionally targeted in the We are Able! program.
- ❖ Existing expertise on religion and ties with religious actors within the consortium offer opportunities for targeting religion more deliberately.

Recommendations

- ❖ Make more visible what is already happening regarding religion in We are Able!. Share experiences with each other.
- ❖ Be more deliberate about the strategy towards religious actors. Some suggested ways in which religious actors could be included in the program:
 - Training activities specifically aimed at religious leaders
 - Embed religious actors in lobby & advocacy strategies
 - Involve religious actors in shifting the power
 - Consider the role of religious actors in the exit strategy
- ❖ Also think about ways in which non-Christian religious actors, such as imams or traditional leaders, can be reached.
- ❖ Invest in a good relationship with religious actors.
- ❖ Depending on the context, connect to the religious ideas of religious actors or take a more 'neutral' approach.
- ❖ Invest more time in getting to know each other as a consortium.
- ❖ Make use of the strengths of the different consortium partners, also regarding experiences with religious actors.

