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Book review: disability and international development: towards inclusive global

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Malcolm MacLachlan and Leslie Swartz (Editors) (2009)
Disability and international development: towards inclusive global health.
New York: Springer
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218 pp.
US$159

This path-breaking volume is a vital resource for researchers and practitioners in the shamefully neglected field of disability and international development. Whilst many disabled people achieve high levels of positive social participation, others suffer daily experiences of exclusion, discrimination and misrecognition in unsupportive or hostile environments. Disability is a particular challenge in low income countries, some emerging from war and conflict, many facing deepening political, economic and governance challenges.

There is often a reciprocal relation between disability and poverty. Thus, for example, the parent of a child with a mobility impairment may have to leave work to care for the child. In the absence of assistive devices and transport they may have to carry the child or adolescent on their backs, possibly developing chronic back problems as well as severe mental distress as a result of the almost impossible demands of the situation. Because of the difficulties of getting around, and especially if the child is a girl, they may be unable to attend school, even if the school is willing to accept disabled children. The child is denied the education and training they would need to support themselves in years to come.

Clearly psychologists have a key role to play in researching the complex array of experiences and responses characterising disabled peoples' opportunities to live positive lives in low income settings. If such understandings are to have actionable implications for intervention and policy, however, they need to be contextualised within wider multi-disciplinary frameworks which take account of the political, legal, economic and biomedical contexts of disability, as well

as the interplay of local, national and global imperatives in shaping disabled peoples' lives.

This landmark volume serves as an invaluable handbook in this regard. Edited by two leading international psychologists, both world leaders in the psychology of disability and development, the chapter authors come from a range of specialisations. These include clinical, educational and rehabilitation psychology, physiotherapy, law, human rights, and social policy.

Thirteen chapters are arranged in three sections yielding a wealth of theoretical, empirical and practical insights. The first section contextualises the challenges facing the disability and development field, through case studies from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and Kyrgyzstan. It includes attention to the close links between disability issues and governance; the challenges of developing sound disability policy, particularly in failed or newly emerging states; and the fraught process of implementing positive international and national policy recommendations in real life settings.

The second section focuses on research development. Drawing on experiences from Africa, Bolivia and Papua New Guinea, it discusses research partnerships between academics and disability networks; how researchers might best generate information that can have positive impacts on disabled peoples' lives – within a research ethos that maximises the role of disabled people in research participation and ownership; the need to build the technical capacity of disabled people to play this role; and the cultural complexities of conducting 'scientifically rigorous' research in complex marginalised settings.

The third section discussed specific research findings and challenges. Chapters explore the disability-AIDS interface in sub-Saharan Africa, framed by attitudes to disability and sexuality; the organisational systems challenges of making assistive technology available in low income settings; the needs of disabled children in Sierra Leone and Burkina Faso; and the challenges of ensuring inclusive educational provision from earliest years to tertiary levels.

The final chapter provides a multi-layered account of caring for children with cerebral palsy in South Africa, looking at transport and health infrastructure, accessing grants, family and gender dynamics, health professionals' attitudes, and the interface of traditional and biomedical health practices.

In some ways this collection serves as a tribute to the agency and courage of the disabled and their families, often in impossibly difficult circumstances. On the other hand it highlights the on-going suffering and frustration people often face in highly disabling social settings. The book highlights the urgent need for international development agents to pay more attention creating enabling social environments. It also provides an important contribution to the on-going challenge of building a sound knowledge base to inform such efforts. Psychologists have a key role to play here, within a wider inter-disciplinary framework, and this volume should serve as both inspiration and sourcebook for future psychological research.

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