Breaking down Barriers

Opportunities and constraints in adopting intersectional approaches

Opening up for diversity

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Executive summary

Many civil society groups in the Global South seeking to address the root causes of marginalisation struggle to recognise the diversity present within their target groups. Yet addressing these root causes requires using intersectional approaches that acknowledge group diversity and the various identities that people have. This study examines why some organisations adopt intersectional approaches and others not. It finds that awareness, an ingrained cultural mindset that values diversity and leadership buy-in have an enabling effect on the adoption of intersectional approaches. Constrainers are discrimination by civil society groups themselves, fear of organisational backlash due to being associated with stigmatised groups, compartmentalised donor conditions and the perception that intersectionality complicates programme implementation. Based on these findings, this study identifies a number of recommendations for civil society groups and donors seeking to promote intersectional approaches.

Introduction

'Marginalised people' are a diverse group. Yet civil society organisations often have a singular target group, focusing on one specific identity. This means that they risk overlooking the multiple identities of people, related to for example their gender, age, disability or sexual orientation. Different identities are associated with different forms of exclusion or marginalisation. For example, the opportunities and constraints that a girl with a hearing impairment experiences to go to school and find a job not only depend on her impairment type, but also on her gender and age. This implies that the cumulative mix of people's identities plays a major role in shaping how, and the extent to which they can participate in society.

The notion of 'intersectionality' helps us to understand the opportunities and challenges that people experience due to their intersecting and overlapping identities. Moreover, it illuminates the limits of tackling the root causes of marginalisation if only one identity is considered. This paper starts from the idea that civil society groups that do not recognise the diverse identities of marginalised people are compromised in their ability to address the root causes of marginalisation and ensure that no one is left behind. This implies that designing effective programmes to address marginalisation requires using intersectional approaches that acknowledge and act upon group diversity and the various marginalised identities that people have.

Liliane Fonds · Radboud University · The Family People · Leonard Cheshire Disability

Cebu DiDRR Network meets with the Cebu Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office to inform them about the Voices for Inclusion program which will showcase the Cebu DiDRR Network's partnership with the office.

photo: Kat Vermonte, Philippines

In this paper we define intersectional approaches as strategies that offer a way to understand and respond to the manner in which different identity characteristics, such as gender, age, disability and ethnicity, intersect and marginalise people.
The degree to which civil society organisations adopt intersectionality and the reasons why they do so (or not) are not yet fully understood. This research centers on this gap in our knowledge and focuses on groups in the Global South. It asks the following questions: (1) To what extent do civil society groups adopt intersectional approaches? (2) What enables and constrains these groups in adopting intersectional approaches? In doing so, it seeks to offer concrete starting-points for civil society groups and donors seeking to promote working in an intersectional manner.

Methodology
The data-collection in this research primarily took place within the context of the Voices for Inclusion project (01 Jan 2019 - 31 Dec 2019) which was coordinated by Liliane Foundation and the Dutch Coalition on Disability and Development (DCDD). The main aim of this project was to enable peer-to-peer learning between civil society groups from Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Nigeria, Indonesia and the Philippines with regard to the adoption of intersectional approaches. In each country, three groups participated in Voices for Inclusion. The 15 organisations that participated in the project represent at least one of the following marginalised groups:
• Persons with disabilities
• Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people (LGBTI)
• Women facing abuse, exploitation and violence
• Young people, or the elderly
• Indigenous groups and ethnic minorities

The peer-to-peer learning process took place in two-phases. In the first phase, there were learning exchanges in the five countries. Representatives of the different organisations undertook action-research to learn from each other's projects/campaigns and discussed their findings in learning events. The second phase took the eye openers to the international level as representatives of all organisations exchanged ideas and best practices during an event in the Netherlands.
The research component that was part of the project used a variety of methods:
• Participatory observation in the team managing and organising the project;
• Interviews with the national consultants guiding peer-to-peer learning exchanges in the five countries;
• Fieldwork in the Philippines and Sierra Leone, including semi-

structured interviews and participatory observation during peer exchange visits;
• Observing the presentations and exchanges during the final event in the Netherlands;
• A validation workshop of the preliminary research findings;
• A webinar in which the research findings were presented and discussed with a broader audience.

Findings
None of the participating organisations had heard about the concept of intersectionality before the Voices for Inclusion project. This suggests that the term is not widely used or recognised in the five countries. Yet the study found that several organisations nevertheless used (elements of) intersectionality in their thinking and doing. Of the 15 organisations in the study, 4 groups clearly demonstrated thinking and practices that we can label as intersectional. Regarding the latter, we observed two different approaches towards intersectionality:
1) intersectionality within groups and 2) intersectionality across groups. While the former refers to taking explicit measures to act upon the diversity present within a particular target group, the latter is about building connections with civil society organisations targeting other groups to achieve synergy and enhance impact.

Enablers
The research identified three factors contributing to civil society groups' adoption of intersectional approaches: awareness, ingrained mindset and leadership buy-in.

Awareness of in-group diversity
Adopting intersectionality in practice requires moving beyond singular 'target groups' and recognising that many people experience discrimination at the intersections of different categories. The research found that organisational awareness is a pre-condition for intersectional practices. Those groups in the research that employed intersectional practices all demonstrated such an awareness which originated from the organisation's specific history and the independent knowledge of employees. Being aware of diversity within target groups provides a new perspective about the opportunities and challenges to empower marginalised people. Such awareness 'opens up' people to new ways of thinking and approaches that they previously did not consider and motivates and inspires people to change their practices.

Cordova Cebu DRRM Officer, Vincent Benitez, provides a discussion on discussion on inclusive Distaster Risk Reduction.

photo: Kat Velmonte, Philippines

Ingrained mindset

Those organisations that adopted intersectional approaches in the study shared a certain institutionalised mindset that views acknowledging diversity as a necessity for achieving goals. For these organisations working in an intersectional manner was an ingrained way of thinking and working. For them, it was natural to put ideas about diversity and inclusion in to practice in day-to-day work. It does not come as a surprise then, that these were also the groups which 'automatically' considered the accessibility of the venue for persons with disabilities in the Voices for Inclusion project even though they were not necessarily working for persons with disabilities. Interestingly, none of these groups had formal policies and procedures in place for guaranteeing intersectional practices, the typical way in which donor agencies try to promote certain types of behavior.

Leadership buy-in

The study suggests that promoting a culture that values intersectionality is not possible without buy-in from leadership. One-off trainings, although important and necessary, are often insufficient to address deeply ingrained and taken-for-granted norms and beliefs. Interviews revealed the importance of sustaining an environment where ideas about diversity and inclusion are continuously promoted and where staff are encouraged to discuss topics that are sensitive or even taboo. Such discussions require support from the top. Leaders can also be role models that inspire and motivate others within their organisation. They can take the lead in pursuing intersectional approaches in programmes and in alliances with other actors. Internally, they can promote awareness within the organisation and encourage open discussions around culturally entrenched relations or sensitive topics.

Constraints

The research found four factors impeding the use of intersectional approaches: discrimination by civil society groups themselves, fear of organisational backlash, compartmentalised donor conditions and the perception that intersectionality complicates programme implementation.

Discrimination by civil society groups

Some organisations in the study were reluctant to work with certain groups, such as LGBTQI or sex workers, due to the staff's own stigmatising beliefs about these groups. Working in an intersectional manner requires staff to challenge their own deeply rooted and culturally entrenched beliefs. A director of an organisation explained, for example, that he was uncomfortable with the notion of working with organisations targeting sex workers as 'prostitution' was something he personally could not endorse. This teaches us that groups that are stigmatised and discriminated themselves may also (unwilling) reproduce discriminating societal patterns towards other groups. The fact that an organisation fights for the emancipation of a particular marginalised group does not guarantee a progressive mindset towards other groups.

Fear of organisational backlash

Marginalised groups typically face stigmatisation and discrimination, but the extent to which this happens varies per group type. Sex workers and those of the LGBTI community in particular face high levels of repression and aggression. In many countries sex work and homosexuality is illegal and civil society groups working with and for these groups run the risk of facing restrictions (often through the use of criminal or administrative laws), verbal attacks, threats and violence. These civil society groups have to be particularly careful to stay out of the spotlight. As interviewees made clear, it is understandable that many civil society organisations are reluctant to become associated with heavily stigmatised groups out of fear of repercussions and becoming stigmatised themselves.

Compartmentalised donor conditions

Most organisations in the study are largely or completely dependent on overseas donors for their financial survival. They indicated that most donors have strict funding conditions that earmark funds for particular target groups. This hugely impacts the type of work they can and cannot do. Some organisations in the study explained that reasoning with donors and getting them to move beyond a compartmentalised target-group approach is often not possible. Refraining from an intersectional approach and sticking to a 'clear' target group therefore makes sense from the perspective of organisational and financial survival. Overall, research participants argued that the adoption of intersectional approaches would remain 'difficult' as long as the majority of the donors stick to using a singular target group approach.

Cebu DiDRR Network members (representatives from Red Cross, Cordova DRRM staff, and PDAO Head) provide demonstrations on how to rescue a person in a wheelchair.

Perceived complication of programme implementation
While discussing preliminary research findings, another constraint surfaced, which is that intersectional approaches may be perceived as complicating programme implementation. Here several related arguments emerged. First, questions were raised regarding the extent to which working in an intersectional manner requires expertise about the different identities people may have. It may require hiring additional staff, or investing in new organisational capacity. Second, it was argued that embracing intersectional approaches makes data-collection and needs assessments more complicated. Taking intersectionality seriously requires having to collect, analyse and use disaggregated data which takes more time and effort. Needs assessments need to accommodate diversity and ensure that all voices and perspectives are considered. What does not help, is that practical tools to flesh out intersectional practices are currently largely missing.

Recommendations
From the research a number of recommendations emerge. Civil society groups and donors seeking to promote intersectional

approaches may consider:
• …investing in awareness raising on the importance of intersectionality, considering that ingraining it in the organisational mindset does not realistically happen through one-off trainings or without leadership buy-in.
• …offering protection to those marginalised groups and their civil society organisations that are prosecuted in their own society.
• …sharing experiences, tools, best practices and research on intersectional approaches.
• …promoting intersectional coalitions that represent different marginalised groups to `pool expertise and enhance solidarity across groups.
• …. supporting research and learning trajectories that shed more light on the enablers and constrainers of intersectionality in civil society organisations.

For donors (including INGOs), the analysis yields one additional implication:
• … promoting and embracing funding conditions that are based on intersectional thinking.

Mariah Agbay, a Deaf transwoman participates the one-on-one sharing of experiences during the Voices for Inclusion learning exchange visit in Cebu Philippines.

Notes
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