Inclusion for all: The Role of the University in Promoting and Securing Access to Services in the Post-2015 Inclusive Development Agenda

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The Post-2015 Development Agenda holds the promise of inclusion at all conceivable levels, from the shaping of the agenda—where previously ‘marginalized groups’ are now a centralized and energetic force in input and decision-making—to ensuring that the objectives and goals of the Agenda are inclusive, embracing all of humanity in its beautiful diversity.

Creativity and imagination should be the fuel that inspires, develops and globally activates the development agenda. We have the ability to harness the lessons learned from the MDG processes, as well as the many significant UN conferences and Summits over the last 25 years, including the most recent, Rio plus 20. Even with the enormous challenges we as a species face, we must not lose sight that sustainable, inclusive development and human rights for all can be achieved. Our profound and attainable vision – to end poverty - will be realized, and the Post-2015 Agenda will set the tone for a positive future for all.

A vision to consider: A lofty but doable outcome should be that by 2030, persons with disabilities, holding hands with their brothers and sisters, will be living to their full potential in a barrier-free world. As it stands now, hundreds of millions of people are denied the riches of culture, education, and access to public transportation services that should be available to all but, sadly enough, aren’t.

Inclusion at all levels is a moral and ethical imperative. To achieve an outcome as the one described above, we should work backwards from this big-picture end goal to developing and implementing a task list that is holistic, socially driven and attainable. We need many stakeholders, in all sectors, in all regions of the world, and we need our leaders to have the political will to actualize the spirit of the Millennium Declaration, and be firmly committed to the ideals and promise of human rights enshrined in the UDHR and most recently, the CRPD.

 Partnerships must include research and academic institutions. Research drives innovation, and academic institutions should play a big part in finding solutions, being stakeholders in the Post-2015 Agenda. We must harness the strengths and wisdom of all academic institutions, including trade schools and community colleges.

Inclusive and sustainable development cannot be realized fully if access to public services – whether it be for health care, transportation, the library system, maternal and child care, social security, government public initiatives, etc. - are not accessible. An accessible society is a society that shuns poverty, it is a society that is welcoming to all people. It is not only the entrance door or the walkway, it is the height of the examining table in the doctor’s office so a woman does not have to have a physical exam in her wheelchair, and if she is an indigenous woman who does not speak the dominant language, she has translation and cultural services at her disposal.

It is a society that provides a barrier free space for people to move, to migrate, to go to a job interview and, more generally, to exercise their civil, political, economic and social rights.

Academic institutions serve many functions, and should have a strong role to play in realizing the promise of inclusive and accessible public services. They are the brain trusts for applied research, data and evaluation, evidence-based research and developing model demonstrations.

Post-secondary faculty and staff are also the mentors and teachers for the next generation. One of the barriers to having access to public services is attitudinal. This barrier is a significant obstacle in progressing towards a truly sustainable and inclusive world. The role of any university or post-secondary institution is to challenge young scholars, support new ideas, challenge stereotypes and promote diversity in rich and imaginative ways. Humanity’s attitudes are preventing the innovation we need to fulfill the aspirations and initiatives of the United Nations. Universities can play a crucial role in changing direction, to being a leader in supporting young people as they question their attitudes and embrace diversity.

The University is an incubator for innovation and creativity. In a Post-2015 development agenda, it needs to seize the moment and be committed to solving the many challenges humanity and the planet face, but in order to be committed, post-secondary institutions may need to be inspired in setting the tone for an agenda. All institutions have scholars and researchers who are innovators but what we need is for innovation to be streamlined in curriculum development and teaching methodologies.

Inclusivity is a value that needs to be placed in the mainstream of our curriculum. Inclusivity, or inclusiveness, is the foundation for Universal Design concepts and curriculum, but it is lacking in other fields. We will not have access to public services or the political will without new and vibrant curriculums in K-12 and post-secondary education. We need to move towards the pedagogy of inclusion at all levels of teaching and praxis, whether it is a nursing program or an engineering program.

Our human variation is exquisite and should not be marginalized in development schemes, policy development, urban planning or health care initiatives. The post-2015 development agenda promises to be a richer, more diverse agenda that will undo the many wrongs, but we will also need post-secondary institutions as a valued partner in all aspects of incubation and implementation.

In the Post-2015 agenda, we need to utilize evidence-based research, not only in disability related research, but also in many other areas of inquiry. Political and community leaders have a significant role to play in fostering partnerships with post-secondary institutions. Dedicated government monies should be spent on grants to universities to solve some of the challenges and exclusionary practices in services, which are sometimes overseen by public administrators who may not have been trained in diversity-related issues.

We need to challenge the universities and ask them to step up and be partners for the 2015 agenda. We need to go into our communities and ask the local college to take part in this revitalized effort to right the many wrongs in the world. We need to ask them to expand the education curriculum for young professionals so that cities and countries have pools of professionals to meet the aspirations of the Millennium Declaration and to fulfill the realization of human rights.

Finally, I have to share a formation of an idea. The United Nations and Intergovernmental Agencies should take the lead in developing a central database whereby post-secondary institutions could input their evidence-based research and projects as they relate to inclusion and disability-related development. The database would be across disciplines and would function as a depository of best practices, which could be replicated. In this capacity, knowledge sharing is inexpensive, providing a liberating and effective way to disseminate information and to communicate across sectors.

Thank you.