Cruelty by Design

How African Cities Discriminate against People with Disabilities

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Cruelty by Design: How African Cities Discriminate against People with Disabilities

Africa is currently home to some 78 million people with disabilities. Meanwhile, recent years have seen the size and populations of the continent’s major cities increasing at a startling rate. As a result, there is a pressing need to consider issues of urban design and accessibility, and how they affect people with disabilities.

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According to the World Health Organization, the world is currently home to an estimated one billion people living with some form of disability, representing around 15% of the global population. Furthermore, it is estimated that over 6 billion people may be living in urban areas by 2050. The significance of this trend cannot be overemphasised. Urban areas are highly contested spaces, and this is especially true for people with disabilities. Access to urban infrastructures, facilities and services will depend on how urban ecosystems are built, and whether the participation and inclusion of all members of society is actively incorporated into the planning process.

This policy note contributes to the ongoing debate about how African cities can better accommodate people with disabilities. While the issue might seem straightforward, there are a number of key policy gaps which this note will highlight. Above all, it brings to the fore the following thesis: that the issues surrounding people with disabilities transcend the popular discourses of rights which, by inference, are political discussions. Rather, these overlooked elements in the narrative...

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need to be addressed through what is now known as “disability-inclusive development”. While the focus of this policy note is on people with physical disabilities, it also attempts to articulate this issue in tandem with other forms of disability.

Disability-inclusive development

Development, by and large, refers to any activity or process leading to improved human wellbeing. For people with disabilities, disability-inclusive development means mainstreaming disability in all development activities. In essence, this means posing the question: “To what extent do development programs and/or projects respond to the needs of people with disabilities?”

The policy note argues that, while efforts have been made to be as inclusive as possible from a policy perspective, the architects of such policy instruments need to take a holistic approach in responding to the needs of people with disabilities. This should incorporate some element of social inclusion, in the form of social justice coupled with a strong emphasis on participation.

However, achieving this requires considerable civic education, focussed particularly on viewing disability as a social construct rather than a medical ailment. The “social model”, as it is commonly referred to, seeks to demystify the perception that disability equals inability.

As such, those responsible for planning, building and governing urban spaces need to take on board that people with disabilities have a role to play in society and, consequently, must be part of the urban design process.

Urban Africa: a changing landscape

The conventional narrative goes as follows. Recent years have been marked by a period of relative socio-political and economic stability across the continent. Taking advantage of this, African governments have begun modernising their major cities. From Kigali to Lagos, municipal authorities are daily embarking on ambitious urban renewal projects. Upscale new neighbourhoods, even entire cities, are being built from scratch, while old ones are undergoing rejuvenation. As a result, these cities – with their impressive architecture and extensive road networks – are attracting people from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds, drawing in those interested in making the move from rural to urban areas.

To give a concrete example of this migratory trend, Malawi’s rate of urbanisation between 1998 and 2008 stood at between 3.7% and 3.9%. Similarly, according to the UN Population Division, the population of Nigeria’s foremost economic hub, Lagos, has grown steadily by at least 3% annually since 2010, and is expected to continue at this rate until 2035. In short, Africa’s cities are expanding at a startling rate.

While such statistics may be interpreted in different ways, one thing seems clear: that the narrative outlined above depicts an Africa realistically only available to a
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privileged minority, and therefore is only a small part of the “big picture”. Presently, such cities are failing in almost every aspect to be accessible and inclusive. Rather, their infrastructures were and are designed to cater exclusively to “able” residents, barely acknowledging the presence of people with disabilities.

Only a negligible percentage of public buildings and spaces are accessible to people with physical disabilities, thus preventing them from making use of the modern facilities and amenities these contemporary African cities take such pride in. While the Africa Union has made some inroads into ensuring access to education, health, employment and social protection, such progress is absent in the designing of urban space, with, to quote Lang et al.’s 2017 article in Development Policy Review: “an apparent and discernible ‘disconnect’ between the rights of disabled people and their inclusion enshrined and guaranteed through the ratification of the UNCRPD, and application of its principles in the actual process of policy development and implementation”.

Accessibility in African cities

The World Bank estimates that 78 million people with disabilities are currently resident in Africa. Despite this, most African cities have no entrenched standards or legal framework aimed at ensuring accessibility in the design and operation of urban spaces. Even where such polices exist – as in Malawi and Nigeria – penalties for non-implementation are absent.

Some countries, such as South Africa, Namibia and Zambia, have made limited attempts (awareness-raising, medical care, rehabilitation, efforts to improve support services) to domesticate the 1993 United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities. Meanwhile, although most countries in Africa have ratified the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD), very few have successfully domesticated it.

In other words, while African countries are in theory signed up to the CRPD, legal enforcement of its principles is almost non-existent. The African Union, acknowledging the numerous challenges people with disabilities face on the continent, extended the African Decade of Persons with Disabilities for a further ten years after the initial period (1999–2009) elapsed. While the AU’s aim of highlighting disability issues and good practice might be laudable, the sad reality is that member countries have made few, if any, efforts in the arena of disability rights.

The continued apathy with which the issue has been treated – despite significant amplification in both the policy arena and development discourse – begs difficult questions on how change may be brought about. In is these questions that are increasingly being posed by people with disabilities themselves: for example, the Federation of Disability Organisations in Malawi (FEDOMA) in Malawi, and the Joint National Association of Persons with Disability (JONAPWD) in Nigeria, have helped influence their respective governments in ratifying the CRPD.
Exploitation and discrimination

The majority of those living with disability in Africa rely on the assistance of family members to navigate public spaces. This leaves them open to exploitation, with unscrupulous family members leveraging their vulnerability in order to solicit alms on the street. Furthermore, people with disabilities are also often unable to use public facilities such as ATMs and vending machines, relying on second parties to carry out their transactions: a situation that exposes them to potential fraud and robbery.

The exclusion of people with disabilities from urban public spaces in Africa is symbolic of the attitude most Africans have towards disability, acting as a constant reminder to the disabled population that they are unwelcome in wider society. Studies have noted the following as among the key issues affecting people with disabilities: lack of public awareness about disabilities; negative employer and colleague attitudes; societal discrimination; prohibitive accommodation costs; a perception that people with disabilities are not productive; and inadequate legislation guiding the employment of people with disabilities.

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Professional bodies in fields such as engineering and urban design, as well as public infrastructure development entities, should include members of local disabled people’s organisations on their boards of trustees. Such bodies should also solicit feedback and proposals from disabled people’s organisations.

Taking inspiration from abroad

There are numerous lessons that can be learnt from more developed countries across the world. In particular, the egalitarian ethos evident in the Nordic countries – where accessible design in public buildings, urban spaces and public transport systems is actively encouraged – can serve as inspiration for African countries. Whilst relevant policies and practice should be replicated in African cities where possible, such frameworks also need to acknowledge the existing social realities and cultural peculiarities of African societies. The details of each component of disability access therefore needs to be worked out individually, taking into account local customs and practices.

Lobbying by foreign governments

There is much the governments of influential countries, including the Nordic states, could do to support people with disabilities on the Africa continent, for example by lobbying African governments to provide better living conditions and physical infrastructure. Donor countries could potentially insist on this as a prerequisite for relevant aid and grants. Inter-governmental institutions might also be lobbied with a view to enacting laws supporting access for people with disabilities in public spaces.

More generally, African states should be encouraged wherever possible to develop an accessible and inclusive design framework for public buildings and urban spaces. Considering how ineffective African government agencies have been thus far, however, such a campaign might initially be focussed on “back channel” avenues: equipping professional bodies (such as architectural associations and town planners) and civil society organisations (including disability advocates) with the appropriate skillsets for championing accessibility.

Mainstreaming disability into the curriculum

With disability having become a topic of scholarship in a number of countries, there is a need to rethink how issues of disability and access can best be mainstreamed into all levels of the curriculum. In particular, academic areas such as the Built Environment, Engineering, Occupational Health and Safety need to ensure such issues are embedded in the curriculum from the very first year. The early introduction of disability studies into schools could also play a role in foregrounding disability in mainstream debates, as well as feeding through to academic endeavours at a higher level.

Collaboration across government

Disability and access issues need to be examined from various vantage points, including how they intersect with other social issues affecting African cities. This needs to happen not only in academia, but within government, including at a ministerial level. The lack of honest discussion on how one social issue can affect others only exacerbates the difficulty of resolving any of them. An example of this is gender-based violence against girls and women with disabilities, where the complexity of the issue requires a multi-pronged approach involving multiple stakeholders.

Mechanisms need to be put in place to enable collaboration between relevant ministries, in order to achieve a holistic approach to dealing with the problems facing people with disabilities. Similarly, leadership and accountability amongst the politicians and civil servants involved in taking forward such proposals should be sought and encouraged.

Legal compliance

Unless governments put in place mechanisms to ensure compliance in making the built environment accessible, people with disabilities will continue to be relegated to the fringes of urban society. Legally enforceable processes need to be drawn up to ensure that architects, urban designers and engineers comply with global best practices in disability access design. Such processes and practices also need to meaningfully incorporate the views of people with disabilities themselves.

Policy recommendations
About the authors

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About this policy note

There is a pressing need to consider issues of urban design and accessibility, and how they affect people with disabilities. This policy note assesses the obstacles facing “disability-inclusive development” in this context, and how they might be addressed.