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Cassandra Newman | Mercy Corps

# UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities crippled without action and commitment

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This July, President Obama signed the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(UNCPRD\)](#). The news came to me during a particularly tough time in Basrah, Iraq. We were receiving frequent incoming fire and my colleagues and I had spent far too much time hunkered down in a bunker, sweating in body armor in 130-degree heat.

I have been Mercy Corps' coordinator for disability rights in Iraq for more than two years, and the "signing" made me wonder: How will this help me or the many Iraqis with disabilities I'm trying to serve? I have seen similar declarations and clauses hundreds of times. USAID has a clause about the inclusion of people with disabilities, the World Bank does and the UN talks ad nauseum about it. But what is the actual impact?

So far, not much. According to the UN, the convention marks a "paradigm shift" — but just because you put in down on paper doesn't mean that attitudes have change. A paradigm shift takes action. The Convention is intended to secure rights for all people with disabilities, but no signatory country is complying with it, so what is the enforcement mechanism? There is none, which makes it a grand but empty gesture.

If we really want to address the disability issue, we need to do three things. **First, we must acknowledge the scale of the problem and the fact that we are not effectively addressing it.** People with disabilities (PWDs) make up 10 percent of the world's population, 650 million people, and every day that number increases. The World Bank estimates that 20 percent of the world's poor have a disability.



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Yet when the Millennium Development Goals — the international community’s agreed-upon targets for combating scourges like poverty and hunger — came out in 2000, there was no mention of disability. Sluggish or nonexistent funding flows have followed suit. This has to change; ignoring a problem doesn’t make it go away.

**Second, aid workers must transform how we address the needs of PWDs.** The international community too often “helps” people with disabilities through what are called “supply projects,” massive giveaways of items like crutches and wheelchairs. The problem is that a wheelchair, particularly the commonly supplied 28-pound hospital chairs designed for patient transfer, does nothing but provide a place to sit.

In order for mobility equipment to be effective, it has to be supplied on a demand basis, with the needs of a specific user in mind. The current supply model would be analogous to my collecting 435 pairs of shoes from Iraq and sending them to the House of Representatives with no information about size or width. The Representatives would then need to sort through the shoes to see what fits whom, and then try to make do with whatever was sent. We would never do that. So why do it for people with disabilities?

**Finally, we need to effect an attitude adjustment by teaching people with disabilities to be activists and role models.** Years ago, as an intern for Congressman Richard Stallings of Idaho, I lobbied for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In 1990, when the ADA was signed, the unemployment rate for PWDs was around 70 percent. Today, it is still 70 percent, and some studies even claim an increase in unemployment since the ADA.

What can we learn from this? Real change for people with disabilities is not about getting a ramp or a wheelchair; America is physically accessible. The main barrier for PWDs is the attitudes that the able-bodied population has about them. PWDs are often viewed through the lens of our limitations rather than our capabilities; this situation is even more marked in developing countries.

People with disabilities must be empowered to demand their rights and smash these preconceptions. Advocacy work to create this change is currently being implemented in Russia by [Perspektiva](#) and was being implemented in Iraq by Mercy Corps in 2007-08 until funding unfortunately ran out.

The columnist Charles Krauthammer said, “Celebrating the paralytic’s ‘courage’ is the psychological equivalent of calling an accomplished black person ‘a credit to his race’ — it is a patronizing act of distancing wrapped in the appearance of adulation.”

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The UNCRDP is a patronizing act of distancing wrapped in the appearance of “rights.” For me and the millions of other people with disabilities around the world it changes nothing. It’s just a piece of paper that world leaders feel good about signing.

Thank you, world leaders, for defining my rights, but I won’t be impressed until you provide the funds to help me realize them. As a start, you can support smart, strategic programs that help PWDs take charge of their lives, not just squeeze into an ill-fitting wheelchair. [Contact me](#) if you need ideas — I’ll give you a program for PWDs that is inexpensive, effective and empowering.

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