

Introducing Disability and the Global South (DGS): we are critical, we are open access!

Shaun Grech^{a*} and Karen Soldatic^b

^aManchester Metropolitan University; ^bUniversity of New South Wales. Corresponding Author- Email: S.Grech@mmu.ac.uk

We are delighted to present the very first issue of *Disability and the Global South (DGS)*. We have been working hard to finalise this issue with much enthusiasm. The idea of DGS goes back a couple of years and responds to a number of concerns as we engaged in the area as academics, activists and practitioners. These concerns remain as we write, reconfirming the timely importance of this journal.

The first issue that we felt was critical was that disability in the global South needed its own space, not only for visibility, but for theoretically and empirically informed work that helped develop this area of research and practice in its own right. We felt that having a publication arena that supported such work would also encourage the infusion of the global South and Southern perspectives on disability within other areas. While fields such as disability studies and development continue to grow, and though in theory they are not averse to engaging with disability in the global South or having such material in a mainstream journal, the truth is that in practice, much of this academic material remains disengaged from Southern disability issues. Development, despite the hopeful enthusiasm about the post-2015 goals and the inclusion of disability within these, remains far from even considering disability a development issue beyond the realm of rhetoric. These exclusions are far too evident in the programmes, policies and development literature. And those promoting with force the mainstreaming of disability are hardly questioning the implications of ‘development’ for disabled people. Fields such as disability studies, remain all too detached from anything they conceptualise as ‘global’, that is outside the UK or the US.

While most of the world’s disabled people are said to reside in the global South (courtesy of very dubious WHO numbers too), disability studies remains as global North centric as it is global North focused (Grech, 2011). This gives rise to the second issue that preoccupied us as we set out in the ‘development of this journal’- the fact that despite disability theory being grounded within the epistemologies of the global North, this is too readily shipped off to the global South, with minimal attention paid to cultures, context and histories, and rarely responsive or even acknowledging Southern voices, perspectives and theories that have been developing as a counter discourse. Indeed, the area of disability in the global South as a field of scholarship, research and practice seems to be developing without disabled people from

the global South.

But, resistance to hegemonic discourses, epistemologies and practices, or even questioning does not earn one any favours in some corners of academia, labouring hard to protect their turf. We still witness a scene where some struggle to have a disability studies that can encapsulate and speak about the whole world, even though much of this theory has been developed by people who have never set foot in a country in the global South. And any criticism that international development does not address disability, is swiftly counteracted by the claim that disabled people are somehow in there, in the category called 'vulnerable', the limbo for all those who do not fit. To be clear, this does not make this theory irrelevant or useless. On the contrary, there is much to be learnt through dialogue and debate. But what about the many other perspectives that are being left out, in particular the theory and voices from the global South or rather the Southern epistemologies, that to use Santos' (2007) words, consistently reinforce the notion that 'another knowledge is possible'? We need to challenge the epistemic and academic neocolonisation we continue to witness, as global North epistemologies and their practices, imbued with imperial historicity weave themselves into a stable future of 'uncertainties' that needs more illuminated perspectives. Furthermore, what we are suggesting is not dissimilar to critiques of a range of global progressive movements, such as labour internationalism that emerged in the late 1970s that have had to address similar contestations emerging from local Southern actors and activists (Biyawila 2011).

These remain very serious preoccupations when much of the literature that dominates the field now called 'disability and development' is limited to organisational reports, rough and ready epidemiological data, and short reports that seem to recycle the same arguments and numbers echoed over the past 20 years- that disability and poverty are linked etc. Much of this work, penned in the global North by and for elite global institutions, is often monodisciplinary, and continues to end with the same recommendations 'we need more research'. More recently some have started uttering the need for qualitative research as though this shift represents a radical form of political inclusion. One is, however, hard pressed to understand why the voices and narratives of disabled people in the global South continue to be invisible, or stifled by numbers often filled with statistical panic, doom and gloom. And much of this work is too often theoretically dry and unwilling to engage with other disciplines, be it disability studies, postcolonial theory, or anthropology to name a few. The excuse of the ivory tower is sometimes heard, perhaps to justify inertia and not reading outside one's comfort zone. In the meantime, the field of disability and development seems to us to remain epistemologically frozen within its own Northern framing as well as uncritical, and many issues are too often left out or intentionally ignored as they give rise to processes of theorization beyond the Northern discursive structures of categorisation.

But perhaps one of the major concerns we had was that some regions remain underrepresented. Latin America, in particular, continues to be left out of much of the nascent literature in the area and as a region of focus. As many of the countries are erroneously and conveniently cast into the middle income bracket by aggregated statistics, the region is not a research and development priority area by the Northern development parties such as the British DFID, which means that many researchers look elsewhere following the scent of the funds. Furthermore, much of the literature produced in the region is hardly read or published in journals on account of the hegemonic domination of the English language.

Overall, these observations and preoccupations led to some questions: how can we develop and open up a space that is radically inclusive and contested, interdisciplinary, where it is ok to question, challenge and be critical? In particular, with DGS we were interested in setting out to bring in disciplines that normally remain disengaged from the study of disability in the global South, believing that this area of study and practice can only grow and flourish if we think outside what have become fixed and often constrained epistemic locations. And above all, we wanted to bring in those perspectives considered as spaces and practices of dissent, that sometimes rock the boat...from the outside, even of language. We wanted to do this in a safe and respectful space, respectful of 'different' forms of writing, perspectives, and contradictions, a space that is safe even in the feedback that our reviewers give and how they give it. We are serious about supportive and constructive reviewing that is open and non threatening and that leaves something positive for authors whether they decide to go on publishing with us or not. And we aim to do this in the quickest possible way, aware that authors are anxious to know the outcomes of the peer review process and get working on the feedback. We also wanted to have a process that encouraged North-South dialogues and critically develop a South-North knowledge transfer.

Critically, with DGS we set out to have a journal prioritising voices, perspectives and knowledge from the global South, as we work to decolonize disability thinking and practice (see Meekosha, 2011). But in doing this, we are also very keen to provide a platform for global North-South and South to South collaborations. Importantly, we grew aware that much of the academic world and output remains inaccessible and closed off, on the basis of language. Wanting to prioritise Latin America, we therefore laid out a journal that will also publish in Spanish. We hope to eventually have all the content in the journal translated in both languages, and why not in the future, in many other languages. While planning we were also alert to the fact that academic inaccessibility extends to activists and practitioners, which are ultimately the critical and informed voices we want to hear from, as opposed to academics talking to each other. We believe that activists should have a strong voice in the journal and for these voices to engaged with as serious contenders of traditional knowledge producers and their institutions, ones whose knowledge locally grounded and historically contextualised. But we also want to know that the linkages between theory and practice are

strengthened, and that academic navel gazing and theoretical abstraction just won't do. We have therefore installed a section entitled *Voices from the Field* which accepts short but reflective and critical pieces by activists and practitioners. At DGS we are perfectly aware of different discourses, styles and modes of communication and the changing nature of information. In our Voices section, we will be accepting a range of material alongside writing, to include photos and short videos as we open up to newer, interactive forms of 'doing' research and reaching wider global audiences. So, be sure to check the Voices page shortly, since there will be some really fantastic calls for material in very original formats!!!

To round off where we were at- mapping our small journey here- all this led to one of our final concerns: how can we contribute to accessible knowledge and write about disability in the global South, when these writings cannot be read by people from the global South and by students, not least on account of cost? Clearly the global political economy of knowledge production ensures that knowledge production remains within the epicenter of global power. One of the pillars of DGS is that knowledge should be free and accessible to all. DGS is therefore proudly open access, all our material will be available online and free to download and share, and importantly authors retain the copyright over their own work. We are not the first to do this, and we most definitely won't be the last- this is the way academic knowledge must go. We therefore celebrate the efforts of and hope to engage with journals who before us made the leap into the world of Open Access.

We have a jam packed issue traversing geopolitical spaces, disciplines and pieces written by academics as well as activists and practitioners. We hope you enjoy reading this first issue as much as we enjoyed putting it together, as we sit back and reflect on our future directions. Please check out the special issues section on our website, as we have a number of extremely exciting and critical special issues coming up. Download freely, spread the word, and get sending your own articles. Again, welcome to DGS, thanks for supporting us... and now... read on ☺

References

- Grech, S. (2011). Recolonising debates or perpetuated coloniality? Decentring the spaces of disability, development and community in the global South, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 15(1), 87-100.
- Meekosha, H. (2011). Decolonising disability: thinking and acting globally, 26(6), 667-682.
- Santos, B. (ed.) (2007). *Another Knowledge is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies*. London: Verso.