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Why Inclusive Societies are Important?

There are many claims for the benefits to society of an inclusive societies approach across a broad range of social outcomes. This is the case for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) and other marginalised groups. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are based on this approach. The slogan for the SDGs is “Leave No One Behind”. The desired impacts range from economic benefits to other development goals, social cohesion and peace. Inclusion is the opposite of exclusion and there is a clear link between inclusion and development. A political strategy based on inclusion has documented much better development results than a strategy based on exclusion.

Women’s increased participation in the work life, higher education and other parts of the society is the single most important factor in the development of the Norwegian society since 1950. People around the world think that the revenue of oil and gas income has been responsible for the fast economic development in Norway. But as the former Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg used to say “It is not oil and gas that has brought economic growth to Norway, it’s the women”. Women’s participation in the working life in Norway has increased from 50% in 1970 up to 75% today. If this percentage was reduced to the average of the OECD countries, the financial loss will be equal to the fortune from oil and gas in the future in Norway. I am using this example to demonstrate the enormous impact of building inclusive societies for women. But this is also the case for all other marginalised groups in the society like PwDs, LGBTs, immigrants and other groups which has a tendency to be excluded from the society.

The title of the RI World Congress in Edinburgh was “Create a more inclusive world” and the World Congress settled for 2021 in Denmark has the title “Moving societies”. These titles pinpoint the importance of building inclusive societies. This is crucial to be able to give PwDs equal rights in the society. Equal societies are characterized by giving the same opportunities to all people. Equal rights give equal opportunities and make it possible to realize the potential and resources of all people. For PwDs it is important that the focus in the society is on their abilities and not on their disabilities.

During the RI World Congress in 2016 I was interviewed by the BBC. The last question they gave me was: “What is the most inclusive country in the World?”. My answer, as a Norwegian, was that I saw the Scandinavian countries as the most inclusive. The inclusive index from 2019 shows that Norway is on top

of the list before The Netherlands and Sweden. Norway has been on top since 2016, the first year this index results was published. This index measures race, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability and sexual orientation.

What has been the driver in the world for building inclusive societies? I think that the UN, through all the important Human Rights instruments has been the main driver for this development. This started out with the Convention on Human Rights from 1948. Especially article 22 and 25 have been important for PwDs and their participation in the society. Other important UN Conventions that can be mentioned is CEDAW (on Women) from 1979 and CRPD (on Disability) from 2006. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has led to several other important international documents: The World Report on Disability (WHO and The World Bank) from 2011, WHO Resolution on Disability from 2013 and the WHO Disability Action Plan from 2014 and the “Rehabilitation 2030: A Call for Action” from 2017. The UN CRPD was also instrumental for the process leading to the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, which made it possible to mention PwDs in several articles.

Inclusive societies must build on active citizenship which means people getting involved in their communities at all levels and within all fields, such as education, working life, family life, political life, leisure and sports and civil society. To build inclusive societies there is a need for a strong focus on human rights in policies, strategies and action plans, a strong focus on equal opportunities in all policies, a strong focus on equality in income and welfare distribution and a strong focus on grassroot participation in decision making.

When we look at the situation for PwDs in the workforce we can clearly see the importance of building inclusive societies. From the statistics we can see a clear link between inclusiveness and work. Unemployment rate among PwDs is high all over the world. But in inclusive societies this rate is much lower. In the Nordic countries the employment rate for PwDs is about 50% while in Asia and in the Caribbean the employment rate is only 20%. In the EU PwDs are two to three times more likely to be unemployed than the average population. Inclusive education is a key point to secure PwDs a place in the workforce. A barrier free working life is also of great importance.

To focus on inclusion, active citizenship, equal opportunities and leaving no one behind is the key to development and good life for the society and the population. It is a win-win situation for the individuals and for the society. The society will have a positive development and the individual will have the possibility to use all their resources and their abilities. What is good for PwDs is also good for the society.