



Ton Dietz, 29 January 2020

Opening speech Conference ‘Pushing Boundaries in Advocacy for Inclusion’: disabled and ultra-poor: not just economics and politics

My name is Ton Dietz. I used to be the director of the African Studies Centre Leiden, one of the co-organizers of this conference. At the moment I am a retired, but still active senior researcher at the ASCL and I was asked to do the opening speech today, because of my involvement in the collaboration between the ASCL and the Liliane Foundation that preceded this conference. It is also important to state at the beginning of my speech that there is a third partner co-organizing today’s conference, the Dutch Coalition on Disability and Development. Currently DCDD brings together ten different organizations in the Netherlands, which all support the emancipation of disabled people in what used to be called developing countries. Besides Liliane Foundation these are, for instance, Light for the World, the Lepira Stichting, Wilde Ganzen, and Karuna Foundation.

For the African Studies Centre Leiden, and for its partners elsewhere in Leiden University – organized in the Leiden African Studies Assembly - as well as Delft University of Technology, Erasmus University Rotterdam and Edinburgh University, this week is the start of a year full of activities called ‘Africa2020’, to reflect on sixty years of political independence for the majority of Africans. Indeed, the year 1960 was a watershed year for Africa: in December 1959 only 30 percent of Africa’s population of close to 300 million people lived in independent states. At the end of 1960 this percentage had increased to 68. In those sixty years under review Africa’s population has increased to more than 1.3 billion people, a more than fourfold increase. And there have been many more changes as well, and there are many different interpretations and opinions about these changes. You will all get a copy of the new Thematic Map ‘Africa at 60’ that we published to summarize our views on these changes.

Today we will focus on what these changes have meant for people, who are generally are being regarded as people in the margins of society, and there is a special emphasis on disabled people in Africa. Of course Liliane Foundation and DCDD and its members not only focus on Africa. They support disabled people (and especially children) in Asia and the America’s as well, and there are also connections with organizations who try to do the same in Europe. But today’s conference will focus on Africa, and particularly on the outcomes of a

recent collaborative research process between Liliane Foundation and the African Studies Centre Leiden in Sierra Leone, Cameroon and Zambia. Under the leadership of Willem Elbers.

I was asked to tell you a little bit about the reasons for my involvement in the work of Liliane Foundation, which started some nine years ago, when I was asked to chair the new advisory council that was meant to support Liliane Foundation in the daring decentralization strategy that it had decided to embark on. At that point in my own life and academic career I was in the midst of very sobering discoveries. Requested by ICCO, Woord en Daad and Prisma, three Protestant Dutch NGOs, I chaired a research project that wanted to topple the evaluation practices. Instead of top-down, agency-focused and outcome-oriented evaluations, we wanted to find out how local people themselves evaluated the perceived impact of the many different development initiatives on their own ideas of development and change, and at the time we did that in Northern Ghana and Southern Burkina Faso. We called it the PADev approach, participatory assessment of development, and we did it together with local universities and think tanks. It was an eye-opener for all of us. What became obviously clear was the lack of inclusion of the so-called ultra-poor people, the 20 percent of the local people, who were locally being regarded as the bottom level of society, in terms of poverty, but also in terms of political voice, and social esteem. Not only the impact of any of the many development initiatives had missed most of these people, or made their life even more problematic, but also very few development initiatives actually included these people, let alone targeted them as a special group. And what also was clear was that many of the ultra-poor were in fact people with disabilities, and that many of the disabled people in these areas belonged to the ultra-poor. For me that was the main reason to work together with Liliane Foundation to find out how exclusion can be turned into inclusion.

During those years there were the first preparations for the new Sustainable Development Goals, which would be launched in 2015, and gradually the concept of Inclusive Development, and the slogan 'Leave No One Behind' became more important. But our research showed that despite all rhetoric, the ultra-poor were very much excluded. Our results came as a shock, also to the funding NGOs. It was a time of reorientation in Dutch development circles, in fact a time of a major crisis, and also many NGOs had decided that they wanted to show more evidence of success, and that they understood the political signs of the time and had to become more business-like. For ICCO our results supported a trend that was already visible: let us focus on enterprising people, let's give up the illusion of reaching the ultra-poor and the illusion of improving their lives directly. For Woord en Daad the opposite position was taken: if it is indeed so difficult, let's even try more and deeper. So Woord en Daad asked us to do a follow-up study, which was done by Anika Altaf in 2012 and 2013 in Bangladesh, Benin and Ethiopia, among what Woord en Daad regarded as their most promising partners in really reaching the ultra-poor. Anika defended her PhD thesis based on this research in 2019, and her results confirmed many of our earlier worries: even for organizations that really focus on the ultra-poor successes have been very limited, and a lot of the lives of the ultra-poor remain hidden and unknown. What also became obvious was that exclusion also has a lot to do with self-exclusion, with lack of self-esteem, and often lack of opportunity and lack of capabilities to improve one's life, and voice one's concerns.

Anika's thesis was very aptly called 'The many hidden faces of extreme poverty', and her book is online on the website of the African Studies Centre in Leiden. We can also say that Anika's insights have had important repercussions in the debates on inclusion, for instance in the Platform for Inclusive Development, that was initiated by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2012, and that brings together people from African think tanks and from the Netherlands. It is not a coincidence that it was Anika who has been one of two authors of the recent booklet for DCDD called 'An untapped potential. How disability inclusive is the Dutch development sector? Steps taken since the ratification of UN CRPD'.

During these recent years of more attention for Inclusive Development as a concept and for its practices in development strategies another important institutional development took place, that gives more room to manoeuvre for NGOs and others dealing with disability. I now talk about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) that was launched in 2006. Currently it has been signed by 163 countries, and the Netherlands is included since 2016, although it took a long time. This convention enables disabled people, their organizations, and NGOs supporting them to follow up on many of the promises made in that Convention, and it creates far more room for political, economic and social advocacy than before, while it also increases the capabilities of disabled people, their caretakers, and their lobbyists to voice their concerns, not only locally, but also in national parliaments and in business fora.

However, in pushing the boundaries for advocacy, the title of today's conference, there are many pitfalls, and personally I see as one of the most threatening ones that there is advocacy capture by spokespeople, who are in practice far away from the disabled people who are part of the ultra-poor, and who have to prove their success and can only do so effectively by ignoring the ultra-poor. Instead of supporting emancipation and real inclusion, results may be the opposite: paternalism, exclusion, and continued invisibility. Another risk is that there is a focus on economic inclusion and political visibility of relatively few disabled people in the show windows, and not enough on the social and psychological elements of inclusion for the majority and on the need to include serious thinking about adequate technologies and adequate medical and psychological care. As I observed during my meetings with Liliane Foundation, there seems to be a hierarchy in attention for disabled people: with physical disabilities higher in the hierarchy than mental and social-psychological disabilities, and children having a much higher priority than adults and seniors. And let us be well aware that, although only five years after the launch of the SDGs in 2015, we can also observe now that the global political climate for pro-poor, pro-disability, and inclusive approaches is deteriorating rapidly, with harsh attacks by people like Trump, Bolsonaro, and Modi, while the champion of inclusive business, Unilever's Paul Polman was sidelined, and the space for NGOs to make use of the SDG momentum is under attack too, with a shrinking space for emancipatory movements in many countries. Let's see, today, what the results have been of the research work that Willem Elbers has done, with his students and partners, for Liliane Foundation and its local NGOs.