

ICTs to Support Persons with Disabilities in Global Policy Development

Derrick L. Cogburn, Filippo Trevisan, Erin Spaniol, Maya C. Aguilar

Institute on Disability and Public Policy, American University, Washington, DC

dcogburn@american.edu, trevisan@american.edu, erin.spaniol@idppglobal.org,
maguilar@american.edu

Abstract

This study explores the development of the Disability Inclusive Development (DID) Policy Collaboratory. The DID Collaboratory is an accessible virtual organizational environment created in 2016 to support the effective participation of the global disability community in the UN Habitat III conference and the subsequent implementation of the New Urban Agenda (NUA). Using simultaneous mixed-methods (i.e. surveys, interviews, participant observation), this paper assesses the socio-technical factors influencing engagement with the Collaboratory and its effectiveness in supporting the participation of persons with disabilities in Habitat III. It is clear from this research that the global network of disability advocates participating in the Collaboratory benefited from its cyberinfrastructure, which in turn enhanced their effectiveness in Habitat III. This suggests that the prototype created for this project could serve as a model for promoting the participation of persons with disabilities in future global governance processes.

Keywords

ICTs; Emerging Assistive Technologies; Global Governance; Participation.

Introduction

With the adoption of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), persons with disabilities were finally placed more prominently on the international development agenda. The SDGs have been a notable achievement for inclusive development, with 11 references to persons with disabilities. This is in stark contrast to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which excluded persons with disabilities despite their making up approximately 15% of every country's population (World Health Organization and The World Bank 27). There is also an historic confluence of several development and human rights policy initiatives that support the social and economic development of persons with disabilities, including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the outcome document of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) +10, and the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). However, during the negotiations for another major global initiative, the *United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III)*, key disability issues had not been included in the New Urban Agenda (NUA).

Excluding persons with disabilities from this process would have been detrimental to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in cities and urban environments for the next twenty years. In order to better enable the global disability community to participate in the final negotiations for this important UN conference and beyond, the Institute on Disability and Public Policy (IDPP) at American University worked with stakeholders including the United Nations Secretariat for the CRPD located within the Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Social Policy and Development (UN DESA/DSPD), The Nippon Foundation, and The Pineda Foundation/World Enabled to create an accessible virtual organizational environment – a “Collaboratory” (Finholt 74) – to support persons with disabilities in this policy initiative and

subsequent implementation of the NUA.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) may be able to provide potential solutions to the numerous barriers that prevent persons with disabilities from participating effectively in global governance processes (Cogburn, “Partners or pawns” , “HCI in the developing world” 84, “Accessibility in Global Governance” xi-xiv). However, thus far, this potential remains largely untapped and under-studied. This paper addresses this issue by analyzing the policy-oriented Collaboratory created to support the effective participation of disability rights advocates to the UN Habitat III process. The successes and lessons learned from this initiative are discussed with a view to enhancing the involvement of the global disability community in the implementation of the NUA, as well as in other future global policy-making processes.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand the accessible socio-technical infrastructure required to enhance participation of the global disability community in global governance processes. It explores the development and evaluation of a virtual organizational platform, the Disability Inclusive Development (DID) Policy Collaboratory, designed to support the *Global Multistakeholder Network on Disability Inclusion and Accessible Urban Development (DIAUD) Network*. This network, which was formed in May 2016 under the imprimatur of UN DESA, involves a variety of groups and organizations distributed globally, including: grassroots disabled people’s organizations; global umbrella disability organizations; inter-governmental organizations; governments; foundations; and academic institutions.

Conceptual Framework

To better understand the DIAUD network, we draw on the concept of Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs). These are defined as “networks of activists, distinguishable largely by the centrality of principled ideas or values in motivating their formation” (Keck and Sikkink 1). TANs are expected to have a collection of participants working internationally on policy issue(s) who have: (1) shared values; (2) a common discourse; (3) a dense exchange of information; and (4) seek to influence policy.

In addition, this type of networks are characterized by three key components, including (Keck and Sikkink 1):

1. Networked Organizational Form: “forms of organization characterized by voluntary, reciprocal, and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange.”
2. Advocacy-Based: “plead the cause of others or defend a cause or proposition.” These networks are organized to promote causes, principled ideas, and norms....”
3. Transnational in Scope: Not limited to any one country, but are fluid between domestic and international realms.”

TANs have been shown to use varying degrees of information and communication technologies. In this study, we explore the degree to which ICTs can be integrated into a Collaboratory to support a TAN, foster its expansion, and promote its success. While the specific ICT components can vary, our approach to cyberinfrastructure typically includes the following broad categories of social and technical resources:

1. People-to-People (e.g. photo directories of members and constituent relationship management services);
2. People-to-Resources (e.g. background resources, paper archives, and document

- repositories); and
3. People-to-Facilities (e.g. synchronous accessible audio-video webconferencing and application sharing).

The DID Collaboratory's cyberinfrastructure is designed to support all these three elements.

Research Questions

This paper is part of a larger project studying transnational advocacy networks in the information society (Cogburn, "Accessibility in Global Governance" 4) and asks four grand tour questions, including: (1) What is the evolution and structure of the DIAUD network?; (2) To what degree does the DIAUD Network reflect the model of a Transnational Advocacy Network (TAN)?; (3) What is the level of "Collaboration Readiness" within the DIAUD Network?; and (4) What has been the impact of the DIAUD Network and the DID Policy Collaboratory?

Methodology

The project has three major phases taking place between 1 June 2016 and 31 May 2017. Phase One, the subject of this study, focuses on the rapid prototyping and development of the DID Policy Collaboratory. While the DID Collaboratory is designed to support various networks, this phase focuses on supporting the DIAUD Network, whose original members were appointed by UN DESA, and included blind and visually impaired, deaf and hard of hearing, and mobility impaired people. DIAUD focuses on developing and integrating disability-inclusive contributions into the outcome document for Habitat III (October 2016) and post-conference implementation of the New Urban Agenda.

In addition to subject-matter expert interviews and participant observation, we administered a web-based baseline survey (O-1) of all DIAUD network participants (N=55) in May 2016. Following the Habitat III conference on 17-20 October 2016, a follow-up survey

(O-2) is planned for late fall 2016. The survey has 85 items divided into six sections: (1) Demographic Information; (2) Participation in UN Conferences; (3) Participation in non-UN conferences; (4) Collaboration within the DIAUD Network; (5) Experience with ICTs; and (6) Trust and Social Capital.

After the baseline data collection, we began building the prototype cyberinfrastructure for the DID Collaboratory (<http://disabilityinclusivedevelopment.org/>) and introduced the DIAUD Network to its mechanisms. In Phase Two, the project will broaden participation in the DID Collaboratory to support other disability-related networks engaged in global governance. Formative evaluation will facilitate iterative development of the socio-technical infrastructure of the DID Collaboratory. Phase Three focuses on summative evaluation and potential recommendations for further institutionalization of this Policy Collaboratory approach.

Discussion

Evolution and Structure of the DIAUD Network

The idea of facilitating greater involvement of the disability community into Habitat III processes emerged from a number of different quarters. First, some of our previous work on Accessible Global Governance, done in conjunction with and supported by The Nippon Foundation [49], pointed to the need for the principled and strategic use of ICTs to support these processes. Second, UNDESA and its CRPD secretariat wanted to support greater disability content in Habitat III. Fortunately, Dr. Victor Pineda, a globally recognized expert on inclusive cities based at the University of California-Berkeley, was already laying the groundwork for this substantive effort. Dr. Pineda was trying to mobilize interest amongst the disability community in contributing to Habitat III, which had previously been unrealized. IDPP, UNDESA, and The Nippon Foundation were able to support this nascent effort with the DID Policy Collaboratory.

DIAUD as Transnational Advocacy Network

Given that DIAUD was initiated by UNDESA, its organizational and substantive interests have shaped the network in significant ways. However, unlike some of the other networks UNDESA supports, there was no formal appointment letter to this network from DESA. As a result, the original 55 members were able to invite other partners and the network grew organically during preparations for Habitat III in summer 2016 to include over 110 participants. In broad terms, the structure of the DIAUD network reflects the concept of a TAN as defined above.

While several members are located in New York, Washington, DC, and California, the network covers all five continents with particularly large groups of members in the Latin America, Western Europe, and the Asia-Pacific region. This makes its scope inherently transnational. In addition, there seems to be a high level of shared values amongst the DIAUD network as all its members are focused on integrating and implementing disability content in the NUA, which in turn also makes this a primarily advocacy-oriented network. Shared knowledge about processes and procedures at UN and non-UN international conferences provide DIAUD with a common language as 95% of its members said they were at least ‘moderately knowledgeable about both.

The baseline survey highlighted that the preferred method of communication among network members was email lists, which 77% of respondents used at least “sometimes” in a typical month to communicate with other DIAUD members. Building on this finding, the DID Collaboratory promoted the use of repositories and webconferencing, which were the second and third most popular communication methods in DIAUD as over 40% of survey respondents said they used each of them to connect with other network members in a typical month. These media,

coupled with a common language and shared values, fostered a dense exchange of information among DIAUD members throughout summer 2016, including background information about Habitat I and II, deadlines about the registration for Habitat III, submission of side events, comments on the draft conference outcome document, and other information related to the Preparatory Committee meetings.

Collaboration Readiness in the DIAUD Network

Previous research on scientific collaboratories has shown that one of the most important indicators of potential success of a collaboratory is ‘collaboration readiness’ (Olson and Olson 139; Olson et al. 44). This concept has three key dimensions: (1) *Collaboration Orientation* Readiness; (2) *Collaboration Infrastructure* Readiness; and (3) *Collaboration Technology* Readiness. In general, *Collaboration Orientation* refers to the willingness and desire on the part of Collaboratory participants to work together. *Collaboration Infrastructure* readiness tries to identify the degree to which the network has some existing tools and techniques for collaboration. Finally, *Collaboration Technology* readiness tries to measure the degree to which participants are experienced in various kinds of ICTs. These skills could be utilized or built upon in the Collaboratory, so the pre-existing skills are also an important predictor of success. Based on our baseline data collection, DIAUD Network has a high degree of collaboration readiness.

Most DIAUD members (62%) said they felt moderately or extremely confident in their ability to collaborate with colleagues in other parts of the world using technology, particularly email and web conferencing tools. This provided DIAUD with a valuable foundation upon which to build an intense flow of both synchronous (weekly coordination virtual meetings) and asynchronous (email discussion list, document repositories, collaborative online drafts) communications. These collaboration patterns were further strengthened by high levels of trust

among DIAUD members. 92% of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that the group has an open relationship and can freely share ideas and feelings with the group, and 76% of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that they can talk freely about difficulties and know another group member will listen to them. Corroborating this impression of openness, only approximately half of the respondents (53%) agreed that they would feel a sense of loss if a team member left the network, which provides an indication of the potential resilience of the DIAUD network.

Impact of the DIAUD Network and the DID Policy Collaboratory

Although the DID Collaboratory is still new, emerging usage patterns of the DIAUD network can be observed in relation to the main Collaboratory components. This sheds light on how the Collaboratory infrastructure informs further strategic choices as DIAUD continues to evolve. Besides email lists, the Internet-based tools with which network members were very experienced or somewhat experienced included document repositories (50%), group calendaring (80%) and web conferencing applications (64%). Correlation analysis found no noteworthy relationships between the most popular technologies in the network and levels of technological expertise. Instead, accessibility is a factor. While all respondents indicated sufficient support for ICTs needs, with participation in a Collaboratory such technology needs may increase.

Overall, the DIAUD network was very successful in influencing the Habitat III process. The New Urban Agenda (NUA) adopted in Quito in October 2016 includes fifteen references to persons with disabilities, one of these a stand-alone paragraph (increased from only 6 references in the original zero draft of the NUA). DIAUD is also ideally positioned to participate in the NUA implementation, having submitted a successful proposal to add Persons with Disabilities as the 16th Partner Constituency Group (PCG) within the Habitat III General Assembly of Partners (GAP), which acts as the main organizing forum for civil society.

Conclusions

This pilot project has enabled the DIAUD network of global partners to explore the potential of accessible cyberinfrastructure to enable persons with disabilities to collectively organize to influence global governance. As demonstrated by the successful outcome of the Habitat III process, by providing the global disability community access to accessible ICTs and the policy Collaboratory model, persons with disabilities will be more effective in advancing disability rights in relation to the SDGs. Technology can facilitate engagement in global governance for persons with disabilities, but alone it is unlikely to catalyze participation. Having a concrete short-term goal was essential to build momentum and encourage increased collaboration in the DIAUD network. Going forward, it seems important for the disability community to be able to focus on similarly tangible goals in order to be able to maximize the affordances of collaboratory cyberinfrastructure.

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