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Title: Is social protection adequate to protect against poverty among people with disabilities? Evidence from in Vietnam, Nepal and the Maldives

There is increasingly strong evidence that people with disabilities – who comprise 15% of the global population – are more likely to be living in poverty and face other forms of deprivation. In line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Target 1.3), governments have been implementing social protection programmes, particularly cash transfers, to tackle inequalities and reduce poverty. Although many social protection schemes either implicitly or explicitly target people with disabilities as key beneficiaries, little is known on whether, in practice, people with disabilities are being adequately included in existing programmes and whether participation is sufficient to protect against poverty in all its forms.

Our research uses a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, with primary data from Vietnam (Cam Le district), Nepal (Tanahun district) and the Maldives (nationally representative). All three countries offer disability-targeted, unconditional cash transfers – which also have linked benefits such as discounted healthcare, transportation and schooling – as well as cash transfers targeted to other groups (e.g. older adults, single women). Our research found that between 30-52% of people with disabilities were accessing a cash transfer, with the majority enrolled in a disability-targeted scheme, except in Nepal. Overall, coverage of disability-targeted cash transfers ranged from 13% (Nepal) to 40% (Vietnam), although uptake of linked benefits was low in all contexts. People with disabilities who were receiving a cash transfer (any type), however, still faced high levels of economic and multidimensional poverty, both in absolute terms and relative to people without disabilities.

This research fills an important gap in the literature, as there has so far been little evidence exploring whether social protection is meeting its intended aims of alleviating different forms of poverty and reducing inequalities, particularly with respect to people with disabilities. Findings from our research are important for improving the design and delivery of social protection to increase coverage and improve impact. As people with disabilities have typically been excluded from development efforts, it is critical to assess whether current programmes are disability-inclusive in terms of both access and benefits, so as to meet the SDGs’ call to “leave no one behind”.