Ellen Spannagel

Hello, my name is Ellen Spannagel, and this is Enabling Commons. Today we are very lucky to have Ipul Powaseu as our guest. Ipul is an advisor for the Papua New Guinea assembly of disabled persons, and a leader and activist. She has held a number of disability and leadership act advocacy roles. Ipul, thank you so much for joining me today.

Ipul Powaseu

Thank you, Ellen, for having me on the on this program and nice to have a conversation with you.

Ellen Spannagel

I'm wondering, before I ask you some of the heavier questions, if you could just tell me a little bit about yourself and your work.

Ipul Powaseu

Okay, um, as you had mentioned, I'm currently, you know, an adviser to the organization, the National Disabled People's organization in Papua New Guinea. But prior to that, I held the leadership role since 2009, when we got the national disabled people's organization, the PNG assembly of disabled persons, inaugurated in 2009. So I held that position up till 2018. And so I kind of play an advisory role to the organization.

Prior to actually joining the organization, the disability movement in Papua New Guinea, I was actually working as an agricultural scientist within the National Agricultural Research systems in Papua New Guinea for almost 27 years. And then I went off to do my PhD in 2016, and I'm putting together my writing my thesis. So yeah.

Ellen Spannagel

I'm wondering if you could tell me how some of your knowledge with agricultural science has been able to inform your work about the needs of people with disabilities.

Ipul Powaseu

You know, prior to joining the disability movement, I was working as an agricultural scientists as I have mentioned. I am actually a person with disability myself, I had polio when I was a little girl. My mom told me I was barely one year old when I caught the polio virus, so it affected my leg. But growing up, I had never wanted to be part of the disability movement because of the or never wanted to be part of, you know, being closer to anyone with disability because of the stigma it had on me when I was growing up and I didn't want to have anything to do with disability. So I kind of, in my role in my professional role moving around, in my agricultural scientist career, I have gone out to the rural areas, and kind of noted that whilst moving around, I kind of don't see a lot of people with disabilities, particularly women with disabilities. So in 2006, when I was asked to attend a women with disability leadership workshop, in one of provinces, that was when I came face to face with a lot of women with disabilities and sitting among them at that time and listening to their conversations and their cry for, you know, access to services, it kind of caught me and I realized that I am one of them, you know, I realized my identity, I'm a person with disability. And here there are women who needed a voice, someone to air their voice because being in the mainstream, I kind of got to understand the government system and see where there could be, you know, assistance from the government to people with disabilities, particularly women with disabilities. So anyway, in 2007, I was confronted by the then Minister for community development, who was responsible for disability in the country. She had wanted someone to lead the organization. And I also refused at that time to because I was working, and had, you know, three children who were going to universities. And so I, I kind of said, No. But she really wanted to make a change, then, Carol Kidu, she was then our minister, she wanted to make a change, you know, bring to the fore the issues of disability. And then I realized that there was a lot of work to do the needs, you know, there was a need for, you know, a concerted voice, a collective voice and organization. And I was just learning about the disability movement. So talking to, you know, the leaders who had been trying their best to organize the disabled people's movement in Papua New Guinea, I said, Let's, why not, let's, let's come up with a strategic plan. And so we did put together a strategic plan in 2009. And it was at that moment that they said, We need you to be our leader. And I said, I can be your voice, but you all have to do the work. And they agreed. So I said, Okay, I'll lead the movement. So in 2009, I was voted in as the president for the organization. 2010, I recognized that, you know, I cannot be able to put a lot of my efforts into leading the movement if I was working full time. And at that time, I was working with the National Research Institute, which is the PNG think think tank for social, economic, and political, you know, research in the country. And I told my director then too, that I have to leave the organization if I have to, you know, make a difference within the disability movement in the country, and I left my job.

Ellen Spannagel

You were saying that part of the reason why you got more involved in a leadership role when it came to Disability Justice, and the disability movement was because you felt like there was a lot of work to be done. So I'm wondering if you can tell me a little bit more about the needs of people with disabilities, where you live, and how all of that relates to climate change.

Ipul Powaseu

I come from a small island in Papua New Guinea, and it's, it's, you know, further north from from the mainland. So I, for me, the, the sea level rising, the erosion of the beach front, is it's an everyday thing that I I am faced with. Having left in my village to pursue my education. And when I went back in 2001, that was after 15 years, the shoreline had actually eroded by about 15 meters. So it's kind of like one meter a year. And I found the, the difficulty in moving around, so I was really affected by that. And when I actually looked around as well, you know, in the communities, you know, old people and also there were people with disabilities who could not access the services in the communities. Some villages have to be relocated a bit further inland and so and by the time it was 2001, when I went back, although I have notjoined the disability movement, for me personally, it was it was a struggle, it was a challenge. So when I kind of, you know, joined the disability movement, I realized that there was no organizations for persons with disabilities, which can have a voice, you know, to, you know, create dialogue with the government. So, when I was approached by the Minister, I decided that I'll take that leadership, because of my work, but also, you know, the challenges that I faced, as a person with disability, I decided that I'll take on the leadership role. Climate change, as you had asked, you know, I experienced it myself, but also my first degree was still my environmental science. So I kind of understood the issues that climate change brings. So in terms of, for people with disabilities, in Papua New Guinea, the effects of climate change, you know, we only talk about the inner sea level rising, but we have not really looked at issues like food shortages, or food security for people with disabilities. So these are some areas that we still have yet to, you know, look into. Also, you know, the impact of relocation as well. Some, you know, small outer islands, are relocating. And so, the cultural perspectives of relocation. People, you know, moving away from the familiar way of life, is areas that we still have yet to look into.

Ellen Spannagel

 Okay, thank you, that helps provide a really important picture. I know based off of some of your speaking engagements and some of your work, that you have also done a lot of work and research on women with disabilities in particular. So I'm wondering if you could tell me some about the specific needs of women in relation to climate change and relocation and all of that.

Ipul Powaseu

 You know, in in Papua New Guinea, and in the Pacific, also, you know, the cultural perception of subjugated role of women is a big challenge. And so when you start to think about when you want to, or looking at advocating for, you know, the the challenges that women with disabilities are faced with, it requires a lot of political will to, to look at how best we can bring, bring to the fore the issues that women with disabilities face. So while you know, women with disabilities have faced multiple discrimination, being a woman itself, and women with an being, being a woman, but also faced with a disability, it becomes very difficult. And so although we have a disability, we still have our role as a mother, that we have to look after our families. And you know, that there was the, one of the reasons that I joined the movement was because of three women who spoke to me about the struggles and the challenges they were faced with. One of them was a woman who lived out of the main town, she lived on an island and she wanted to bring in, you know, her garden produce in a, you know, sea produce that she wanted to sell at the marketplace. But when she comes to the market area, there is no space for her, she is asked to sit on the on the floor, but she sits in a wheelchair. And so this is struggles that women with disabilities face, they still have that responsibility as a mother, as a wife, to the family. And so you know, for for us women with disabilities, we've we've kind of decided that we need to have our voices together. So in 2018, I also ran a strategic planning workshop for women with disabilities. We've put ourselves together. We, we have been asked, you know, at times to be, or to be represented at some of the discussions, you know, that general discussions around challenges facing women gender based violence, and you know, these areas. But it's, it's, again, our voices are not really that strong as yet. And I think it's, it requires that, that collective voice, that once we have a collective voice, or an organization that is strong for the voices of women with disabilities, that we're hoping that our issues can also be taken up, but there are champions, community based organizations, that sometimes will take the issues forward, particularly for women with disabilities. But again, talking about the area of climate change, like as I was saying, you know, the challenges that we faced a much more than just, you know, you know, when you really look at women, for women with disabilities, it's because of the barriers the environment, you know, the the attitudes, that we are faced with also no further marginalize, you know, the issues or challenges that people women with disabilities face. So, if it requires a strong voice for us to, to bring our issues to the fore. I always have this policy that I gatecrash if there is a meeting and we are not invited, I just go and I sit there and you know, when they are discussing about women's issue I, I bring forward to the, to the discussion the issues women with disabilities face. So it's, it's some of those things that you we there are a few of us that needs to bring forward to the, to the table when there are opportunities that we can have. Yeah.

Ellen Spannagel

 I really like that, just hearing about how you like to get crash meetings and make sure that's something that people are talking about. I'm wondering if you can tell me about some, like strategies that have you that you have learned are effective when you're advocating for the needs of, of people with disabilities, woman with disabilities, like what are some of the things that you have, and like you and colleagues and people in the groups who are working with have learned to be effective strategies when you're talking to policymakers and decision makers.

Ipul Powaseu

Having that strong collective voice has been quite good. When we put when we started the organization, the National disabled people's organization, the first thing that I actually had done was ran a series of human rights training for our leaders. So they understand how they can be able to shape the conversations. So we talk, you know, we went through the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, with our leaders at the provincial level,how can how they can use the CRPD to shape the conversations around policy implications in a policy interventions. And so that's one of the strategies that we use, you know, for, for change to happen. We have to be the change agents ourselves. And this is not only not at the national level, but at the regional level, the Pacific Disability Forum is also we've also, you know, taken on that role of informing our leaders, so our disability leaders, about you know, understanding the government system understanding, the various policies and inbeing trained on advocacy skills, because, you know, someone can talk about issues, but they can, the the experience that we bring with it with it, also, it tells a lot of things. So, you know, being the change agent yourself is also it's one of the strategy that, but we have to equip ourselves with understanding what we're talking about. The other area that we also had, you know, one of the other strategies is, whilst we, you know, holding trainings for persons with disabilities, we also bring to the table or to the workshop, organizations, that are involved in the area that we are discussing. So, if we're talking about women's issues, we bring in a women leaders from mainstream women organizations. We've tried to shape the conversation for them to understand, you know, where we are coming from. And so we create champions with them, the, you know, the groups that we're talking with them, they will be the ones that bring, you know, the issues if we are not at the table, at least they can be our voice. So looking for champions within mainstream organizations. If you don't understand what you're advocating one, then you cannot know how to shape the conversation. So in the first few years, that's what we tried to do. Build the capacities of the capabilities of our leaders to know how and what and how can they be able to shape that conversations in making policy. And it brings a lot of confidence to persons with disability who are leaders in the provincial at the provincial level.

Ellen Spannagel

I'm wondering if you can tell me a little bit about your experience in advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities, especially in relation to climate change at the international level, and what that experience has been like

Ipul Powaseu

 I think it was 2016, at the conference in Brazil. It was at that time when, you know, a lot of women around the world had gathered in Brazil, and were talking about issues facing women. And there was there was a discussion around climate change. And because it's my area of profession, I was interested to attend that. And that's what brought me to the I think the cop 22 in Morocco, in Marrakech, Morocco. Going to that, cop 22, in Morocco, I realized that the voices of people with disabilities were not really an agenda on the table, although there were a few as so about two or three people with disabilities, you know, participating about time, but they came not as part of a constituency on disability, but being part of, you know, their own organizations. And conversations were more around, you know, the impact of climate change, so the state's responding to, you know, the impact of climate change. But there was not much around, you know, the various constituencies, there were some women, which I went as part of. And so it was at that time that when we were discussing issues facing woman that I also brought in all the conversations around women with disabilities. And I kind of strongly advocated for the fact that whilst, whilst we are women, we have specific issues that really needs to be understood as well, because of our disability and the challenges that we face. And so usually, at the end of the forum, they would have responses from the various constituencies. And I was asked to, you know, deliver on behalf of the women and gender constituencies. And so I thought this was an opportunity that I'll put forward, you know, the issues faced by people with disabilities, and particularly women with disabilities. Being a woman from the from the Pacific, which is really affected by the sea level rise and the impacts on relocations. I'm also an indigenous women with a disability. So I spoke on that as well. And in after that conversation, there were a number of Pacific Island leaders who came and saw me and they said, Oh, we recognize that, yes, there are persons with disabilities. And we don't seem to understand, bring their challenges forward as well. So there was it was a very good conversation had.

Ellen Spannagel

 I'm wondering if you might be able to explain a little bit more of those impacts and how you were saying how when you did speak, some of the regional leaders came back and spoke to you and said, the, you know, these are important issues. We haven't been paying as much attention as we should have. Did they respond in a way that began to meet the specific needs of Indigenous women with disabilities?

Ipul Powaseu

Within the Pacific region? There are conversations going on around, you know, the impacts of climate change is having on people with disabilities, the relocations of the it's which is affecting their way of life, you know, because of the challenge the different challenges we face because of our disabilities. You know, being relocated is going to also bring the challenge of how do we manage ourselves from an island if we live on an island and we are moving into a mainland, where, you know, the the physical environment is quite different from, in a way where we have been been, you know, like, for instance, in Papua New Guinea, there are people from an outer Island, we call them the first refugees, you know, climate change refuges. They have moved into onto the mainland. And I had discussed with that woman, one of the women who was she's an advocate on climate change, but particularly for those that have been relocated, not specifically for disability, and I did ask her the question aboutmhow are they managing, relocating people with disabilities on to the mainland. She was showing us a picture on bringing the people from the island to the mainland, building houses where it's on stilts. And so I asked the question, how are you considering those who may have difficulties, you know, climbing stairs? And she said, Oh, yeah, we kind of are going to be really looking into that area. So those are some of the things that while you know, people are relocating, we really need to also have that voice of being there to, to see how we can shape that conversations around the experiences of people with disabilities, somehow, it can also influence the way things are being discussed. And you know, how you can also consider their needs. So that there's there's a lot of areas, there really needs to be a lot of discussions around how this, this discussions can get into the, into the policies. So that it there, it's institutionalized, and, you know, the state to take that responsibility. For us, as people with disabilities, we are only advocating, we can, you know talk, but it requires the leadership at a political level, and also at the implementation level, to make the change happen. And it requires a lot of getting the voices of people with disabilities onto the table. You know, as a leader in the disability movement, we really need to have that network and connections with political leaders and also in our leaders in mainstream organizations if we really need to make the change. But at the same time, we need to build the collective voice, our national voice, the voices of people with disabilities, we really need to build the capacities, but also the capacities of individual leaders, but also, that national voice to be strengthened.

Ellen Spannagel

Well thank you for sharing your insight on what's happening in the country, and how, how leadership is working for those organizations and people on the ground right now in Papua New Guinea. I'm wondering if you can tell me a little bit more about your PhD, and the research you've been doing there on disability inclusive policies, and mainstreaming disability across policy areas.

Ipul Powaseu

Okay, thank you. In the, in my research, I found out that while people want to make it or want to do something, you know, let's say leaders political will, they still need that capacity. They need to have the capacity to understand disability issues. Before the disability movement, disability or people with disabilities are often looked at as people need someone to look after. And so when you look at policies that have been developed, around that area, it's about let's do it for them. Social protection policy, you know, let's say you know, cash handouts, but you know, the way disability is moved on or you know, has emerged is different. When you look at the policies in country, the policies were built around that area of let's do it for them, you know, and it was focused more on the person rather than the environment, the barriers, you know, that we need to remove so that that person with a disability can also participate effectively and fully. So there is there is that understanding now that something needs to be done, but we have the resources, the capabilities and the capacities are not there. So there is a need for the government to start or look into building those. If we really want to have inclusive, or inclusion of people with disabilities in mainstream social area. But the resource support is, is lacking for that. At the community level, you know, the the leaders are beginning to understand or the community leaders, but again, it goes to lack of community resources, both the local level and the provincial, the sub national level and at the national level. So resource support is, is a big area, there is a need for resource support for inclusion for people with disabilities, at various sectors of society, there is political will. But there really, there is a lot of resource support needs that needs to go with it. You know, the workforce, so the employment level, educational level health services, those are areas that require a lot of support, much of the support is really not coming from the government, it's the NGOs that are working within that space. So for example, you know, sign language interpretation, or sign language, it's really not done by the government. It's done here in Papua New Guinea church based organizations. And so those are areas that the government needs to start to look into. In terms of assistive devices, we don't have that in country. So we also have, you know, NGOs and other organizations like, you know, the latter day saints, the church based organizations that are providing wheelchairs to people with disabilities. And so, in this is more focused or centered around in the urban areas, where this organization, sir, in the rural areas, there is a there is a real great lack of this resource support. So these are areas that really need to be strengthened. In 2015, when we launched the updated version of the national policy on disability, the government announced sign language to be the fourth language of Papua New Guinea but have not put the resources into them. I mean the national budgetary support to, to support resources for that as well. So there is a lot of things that needs to be done in order to to integrate disability, to mainstream disability across or realign disability across the mainstream policies sector policies.

Ellen Spannagel

Could you explain to me more about, like what you see the role of disabled persons in this process looking like in terms of their leadership and their knowledge and mainstreaming disability inclusive policies?

Ipul Powaseu

For disability in in Papua New Guinea, in the Pacific, the main advocates have been people with disabilities themselves, but we don't have the power to make that change. at the policy level, it is the government the focal points. And so, this through the Pacific Disability Forum, we've had I think three Pacific regional disability ministers, disability disability ministers forum, where the discussions are now focused around how the government can streamline disability within the sectoral policies. So that that has been the way we've we've tried to make changes at the government level at the political level, people with disabilities are advocating for that change to happen. And we have we've we've used the the CRPD as our tool to, to, to influence that change at the political at the sorry, at the policy level, but it is the people at the government level that really needs to make the change happen. And this is where they lacked the capabilities capacities to understand how to harmonize the CRPD with the various policies and legislations in country. So there really needs to be the capacity building for the implementers at the government level, who are the ones that have that mandate? To make that change?

Ellen Spannagel

In line with that another question I had was, what other topics do you think should be brought to the forefront in conversation surrounding disability and climate action? So I guess in that regard, like conversations surrounding disability and climate action, but also topics that should be brought to the forefront in policies right now?

Ipul Powaseu

We talk about climate justice and you know, it's, it's the issue of equity, a lot of people with disabilities, again, I was talking about, you know, food security, you know, the relocation, also the change in their physical environment, it's making it difficult for people with disabilities to, to adjust, we can talk about the experiences and the challenges we face. But we really need to start to discuss around the area of how do we bring this, you know, challenges into the policy, at the national level, there's a lot of traction in the area of gender and women constituent among women, because they've got that constituency, and they are always the, you know, top conferences, you know, but we don't have that, for people with disabilities. So, until and unless we have our voices, also, as a constituent, we will continue to talk but it's, it's, it's gonna be either in a being part of another constituency. And so it's, it's just going to be an had an add on, rather than, you know, mainstreaming disability into the conversation. So I would really like to see that because, you know, let the, for example, now, you know, the COVID-19, it's really affecting here in Papua New Guinea, but there's no conversations around the impact it's having for people with disabilities. We don't have access to so accessing, you know, the testing center. They're talking about lockdown, people with disabilities cannot be able to access, you know, basic food, and, you know, the basic needs. So, those are the things that, you know, when you talk about disaster, and you know, impacts of climate change, having a voice at that table is better than just being a part of added on, you know, to, to another group. So I'd like us to look into that area as well, where we, we needed to have our voice at that global level. My experience at COP 22 was that I was the lone voice of people with disabilities. And it was added on with the agenda and women constituency, or women and gender constituency. And it would have had more impact if that we had that, you know, disability constituency, because we would have looked at a lot more area of, you know, have discussions around climate change. And that could actually help put more weight into the national, the state reports when they were going back, but I really wanted to, to know whether you know that that conversation also had an impact on some of the country reports that whether they had actually integrated some area of disability into their reports, is something I've not really looked into, here in PNG but also in some of the areas in the Pacific countries in the Pacific. But earlier on when I was saying that, whilst I was the lone voice at COP 22, the Pacific Disability Forum had or already been discussing around, you know, they're aware of, you know, disaster and climate change and in various other forums, so so but in terms of climate change, and at the global level, and we would like to push for maybe our voice to be another constituency, because it also brings a lot of in a weight to discussing disability and climate change as a mainstream area rather than just an add on. Yeah.

Ellen Spannael

 I really wanted to thank you for just sitting down with me and very, very patiently explaining some of the challenges and the opportunities you have had. Yeah, you just have so much knowledge to share, Ipul, and just thank you for sharing it with me today.

Ipul Powaseu

Thank you, thank you for having me. And it was you know, great talking with you as well.