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**Mostafa** The issue of disability is not on their radar in terms of specific risks—there may be additional consequences that disabled people face; the accommodations, the budgets required. So I believe that us, as disabled people who studied in the field of disability inclusion and started working in new areas like DRR [Disaster risk reduction], is really, really interesting because your presence as a disabled person is providing a message.

**[Lightly rhythmic major key guitar music, with watery/peaceful nature sounds underneath. Music volume fades as Áine talks]**

**Áine** Welcome to Enabling Commons, a place for conversations with activists, experts and scholars at the intersections of disability and climate change. The podcast is produced by the *Disability Inclusive Climate Action Research Program* based at McGill University. I'm your host, Áine Kelly-Costello. Today, I talk to Dr. Mostafa Kemal Attia, an international consultant on disability inclusion and disaster risk reduction. We talk about Mostafa's journey into disability consulting as a blind person originally from Egypt, who has also lived extensively in the UK. We cover Mustafa's experiences at the climate negotiations (COP 27), and what he's learning in his current role for the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. Here's our conversation.

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**Áine** I'm speaking to Mostafa Kamal Attia, and welcome to Enabling Commons. It's great to have you here, Mustafa. Could you start off by introducing yourself and sharing a little bit about your journey, including working in the disability international field?

**Mostafa** Yeah—first, thank you very much for having me today, it's a pleasure to be in this podcast. My name is Mostafa, I am originally from Egypt, a person with a visual impairment. I've been studying in a blind school, moving forward to be graduated from the English department of one of the Egyptian universities. I have then moved forward to start my disability field through working on the *National Council for Childhood and Motherhood* as Assistant Coordinator for Disability Unit. And actually, I have to mention here: the barriers that I started to face when I just get employed—people there were a bit scared to provide me with lots of responsibilities, maybe to travel on my own, maybe to lead or to manage a project… It took time for people to be convinced; they understand about policies, they understand about conventions, they understand about human rights quite well, they know about inclusion. But when it comes to practice, it's a bit different in our countries.

And they’re thinking everywhere in the world, even if they employed me to be an image for disability, they employed me to say “We have employed a disabled person.” I said, “Okay, I don't mind, because I would be able then to change that.” Which happened, because following my M.A., which I have done in Leeds University, I have returned to back to my job, but with more responsibilities and with more ability to do work. So I was being able, then to monitor and manage projects, working and traveling to different governed rates. So it happened; people started to be convinced. Definitely, I have met some open minded persons, without [whom] I wouldn't be able to do all of that. I have then continued my journey with a Ph.D. on disability inclusive development, also from Leeds University, also from a scholarship. And then, I have started my career as a consultant and actually for people to be, as well, convinced that I am now not an employee; rather, [a] consultant with expertise, [which] took time. One of my interesting areas that I like almost to work with is the disability movement. I like to work a lot with disability movements and building the solidity of individual DPOs and building the solidity and empowering disability movements, because I believe this is the only way for our rights to be advocated and for our concerns to be elevated to the policy consultation process. So, I'm currently a trustee of *Disability Rights UK*, which is really a new horizon of learning for someone who is coming from the Global South, lives in the UK as I am now, and also I'm a co-chair of *Leeds Disabled People Organization*. I was definitely an expert member of the DPI (which is *Disabled People, International Arab Regional Office*) and other organizations as well.

**Áine** Thank you so much for sharing this background, you touched on a lot of really interesting themes there. Can you tell me how you first connected to working on the intersections between disability and climate change?

**Mostafa** I think my interest in the area of disability and disaster planning I started three years ago, when we was colleagues from *Disability Rights UK* and actually from Leeds, thinking of possibilities to enable and support disabled people, or people with disabilities during COVID-19. We had this conflict issue between health and disability rules, like support given to people. For example, they would say “social distance,” but what I would be doing, as a blind person, as I need someone to guide me, for example. So, the tube of London, or busses, the personnel there doesn't know how to assist you. In airports we're facing because I'm traveling a lot, I’m always facing difficulty for someone to guide us because disabled. So, we have tried to publish a group of guidelines and cooperation with other organizations to think of possibilities, to raise awareness about that. We move forward.

And last May, I have attended the seventh session of the *Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction* in Bali, Indonesia in cooperation with the UNDRR, which was really interesting for me, not only to think of, maybe, disasters in my area or in Egypt or in the UK, but rather other disasters like floods, like earthquakes. Not about them; but about the situation of disabled people and the accomodations required to support them in these crisises. And I wouldn't thought how difficult it is—so it was really eye-opening to listen to people who are working in these fields and the concerns, the recommendations about *Sendai Framework*, which was published, I think, in 2017 in Sendai City, in Japan, to progress countries' performance regarding disaster risk reduction. I will always say DRR, to reflect disaster risk reduction. So, that was really interesting.

Egypt then organized COP 27, and they were doing, I think, a good job before and during COP 27—we talked about that. But, I mean, I was able to participate a lot in this regard. I'm also working now as an international consultant with the United Nations, as I said, because it's an Arab regional office. Due to many priorities, maybe due to poverty, maybe Arab countries not giving much focus to the issue of mainstreaming or inclusion, or maybe other reasons like attitudinal barriers. They are not focused much on disabled people or accommodation when it comes to DRR. And I think the situation comes also from the fact that they are not focused, somehow, on these issues, even if we have policies. As I said earlier, policy is totally different than practice. This is why what I'm doing now is to revise climate change and disaster planning strategies on some Arab countries and to make sure to see where are disability mainstreaming, to speak about recommendations and findings, to interview some stakeholders working on DRR and focal points in these countries, only with the purpose to educate them about disability missing, but also to invite someone from the councils to a disability council or ministries in these countries to learn about their efforts in DRR And there are scattered efforts; even if you have one event happening here or [have] one organization organize this issue, it is somehow scattered and people doesn't know about others' work. You don't have a platform to document DRR on disability mainstreaming. And efforts; how you are involving disabled people, listening to the demands, elevating it to the strategies. So, I think we have a lot, *a lot* to be done. If we have a lot to be done in the global North, we have more and more and more to be done in the global South.

**Áine** I think it's it's really interesting that your way into this topic kind of was initially through COVID, right? Because one of the things that disabled people have been saying and highlighting, I think—especially those of us who've been working on the disability and climate intersections for a little while—is that both of the crises in terms of climate crisis and and the COVID response, if we're not careful, mainstream responses to these will really leave disabled people behind in quite disturbing ways. Where we can, you know, in the worst circumstances, be left for dead. And so, then to be able to say, “Okay, well, as soon as we're starting to work on them, let's find those intersections between how can we respond in really inclusive ways and bring learnings from different stakeholders into the strategies.” I know you're quite new to your role with UNDRR, but I think that's also a really interesting point at which to ask you this question: What are you learning from talking to stakeholders? Is there anything surprising? Yeah. What do you feel like you didn't know before?

**Mostafa** We had an Arab meeting with the UNDRR in Sharm el-Sheikh in December, and I presented issues around disability mainstreaming and planning and involvement and so on and so forth. And people were really surprised to hear about that. The issue of disability is not on their radar in terms of specific risks. The, maybe, additional consequences that disabled people face: the accommodations, the budgets required, and lots of things. So I believe that us, as disabled people, who are learning and working in this field, who studied in the field of disability inclusion and started working in new areas like the DRR is really, really interesting because your presence as a disabled person [is] providing a message. Your presence as a person with knowledge and work experience and professional experience also provides a message. And if you have public speaking skills that also provide the message, which is important because you need to be convincing to others as well—not only to ask them to abide by policies. But what I have learned in this area, I believe that this is the advantage of being a consultant: because you always start new assignments with new people, in new areas. This is why I said, “Yeah, I would like to be focusing, these days, on DRR—because I believe it's exactly like disability, like the concept of inclusion. Maybe 50 years ago, everyone working on disability with the concept of segregation, with the concept of exclusion. But now, everyone [is] talking about inclusion, inclusive development, design. And similarly, this is what is happening now to build stronger intersections between disability and disability mainstreaming and DRR. So we’re still in the early stages, I believe, to convince and adhere people to understand the importance or the necessity of disability inclusion—for disabled peoples’ voices to be part of DRR. So I think this is important—definitely, I'm learning a lot about the findings. I never read before about DRR and climate change strategies, so I'm reading totally different strategies; understanding how countries think of DRR in general.

Some issues that I have found related to disability are not actually directly related to disability; if you are losing coordination, if you are losing cooperation between ministries and private sectors, if you are losing the concept of human rights in general, and social inclusion in general (like you're not mentioning gender or you are not mentioning other marginalized groups or situations), you would definitely and consequently not [be] mentioning disability as well. So, disability is part of a big puzzle of social inclusion and inclusive development; if you are not mentioning these rights and these groups and what accommodations and demands are needed for them, you consequently will not have mentioned disability as well. It's really interesting to see how viewing disability is connected to all of these other topics.

Last thing, lots of stuff. One thing that I have learned: lots of people talking about the disasters itself, but not linking social science to the topic. They talk about disabled people as part of the risks, as part of the consequences that may happen *due* to disasters. They are not talking about disabled people, the accommodations needed for them as equal citizens who require support as other people.

**Áine** Lots of super interesting things there. To start at the end—yeah, using disability as a kind of a fear thing, right? As a “This is going to be a burden on the health care system,” or “This is going to be expensive because people will become disabled in the disaster.” And that's such a one-dimensional way to look at things, you know, because also thinking about how long COVID has played out, you know, is really important to be preventing that—that very disabling consequence of COVID for so many people. But at the same token, just fearmongering is not actually the full picture at all. And it's really important to be thinking about everyone who is already disabled and thinking about it from a social lens, as you mentioned.

The other thing that struck me in your talking about DDR and disability, only coming into the picture recently, is that like DRR has been, you know, a field as far as I know from, you know, quite a lot further back than talking about climate change, right? Because disasters, on some level, were kind of always there. They're more extreme, more intense, severe, frequent now. But it is really worrying hearing that in the Arab region—and not just the Arab region—that disabled people have been left out for so, so, so long. And there's really a lot of catching up to do. And you also made a really great point about the importance of being a presence in the room, as a disabled person, visible to people making your point rather than just, perhaps, inserting a line in a draft of a policy, the actual interactive elements being really powerful there. So thank you for all those rich insights. I want to move back to what you referred to earlier around attending the major state parties' conference on Climate Change—COP 27, last year in Sharm el Sheikh. You were attending for the first time as a disabled Egyptian who has consulted for the Egyptian government as well, and having, you know, that awareness of the international diplomacy and human rights contexts, could you paint a picture for me of what you were actually doing, day-to-day, participating in COP?

**Mostafa** Actually, I believe that I have a very interesting role, some tasks that I wouldn't expect to do. So, I did sort of one informal task first. So, because I know lots of people who are coming some of whom you introduced me to actually, coming to COP27 and we had those those sorts of groups. So people were writing about challenges that they may face, or maybe requirements—we need someone to pick up from the airports, we need someone to like take us from the airports, we need an accessible accommodation, we have this challenge. Because I know people who are working in the ministry, and because, somehow, there is a registration problem within the UNFCCC I think, disabled people wouldn't be able to express their impairments and to express their needs, so the Egyptian government *would* be able to respond to that. So I was connecting between disabled people and the focal point working from the ministry. So, “Please go ahead and collect this person from the airport and please help and stuff”—like, it was not work definitely as their manager; I was just trying to advise and help in this regard.

The second thing we, as disabled people from different countries, try to meet every day—and we've definitely found that challenge—is to find a room. Sometimes, I have tried to sort that out; sometimes, other people try to. Sometimes, they don’t managed to find a room at all, so we were just meeting in corridors. One role that I was doing was leading some roundtable discussions. So we have done one about a survey done in Egypt months before COP27, to understand disabled peoples’ attitudes and knowledge about climate change. It was [a] very interesting session between the Minister of Environment, UNICEF and other international entities. But one interesting event that I would like to talk about is a meeting requested by the Minister of Social Solidarity in Egypt, to meet with disabled participants to know their feedback about accessibility. She was really honest when she said, “It's our first time to organize here. It's [our] first time to organize about accessibility. We understand that we are not being able to do a lot. So what do you think? Can people start to reflect?” Some people shared their challenges as well. I wouldn’t lie, definitely, the infrastructure for the location was not great. The provided accommodation was not fantastic. But we also have to give the ministry their credit because they're right they had a number of volunteers, they have [a] number of sign language interpreters. They tried their best to assess like, they have picked up some people from the car, they have six cars from from the airport, they have six cars with ramps to elevate disabled people. So they *have* tried. Maybe, the next time, they have to start much earlier. So, to make more accessible infrastructure, because lots of struggles faced by disabled people because of the absence of infrastructure. But I also believe that disability should be more and more on the agenda—and if that happened, they *would* start earlier.

**Áine** That's good to know that there was an effort towards accessibility on the ground, from the Egyptian organizers. Because, of course, the general environment in Egypt at the time, with a lot of repression of human rights, did make civil society participation, generally in COP, quite challenging. And it's challenging anyway, but particularly challenge this year. How did you experience the environment as a blind person attending COP?

**Mostafa**] The environment was huge; very, very big. I think one of the biggest environments to conduct a conference in Egypt, if not in Arab countries. It is interesting that they have done it in Sharm el Sheikh, because they’re used to the Egyptian environment—maybe I'm not the first person to answer that question. What I have done, is I have asked someone, “Please take me around, orientate me or introduce me to the area.” And this is what people [have] done for me. The area is huge, [due] to the fact that I cannot walk on it by my own. And it's very, very big, very busy. Lots of barriers and obstacles everywhere. I have to rely on volunteers; I have to say that without volunteers, without guides, I wouldn't be able to manage the environment at all. I think there were around 1700 events happening at COP 27. So, to locate yourself about the event location, some of which was really, really crowded. So, like navigation, and people actually commented on the signage in general, like signage was not a lot. Some areas having lots of signage, others not. But the event was really big; I think the number of participants were around 63,000 participants in Sharm el Sheikh—if I am correct—which is actually more than citizens of the city. It was a huge event, and I'm sure that the government have taken lots of lessons learned, and things to focus on when they organize next conferences.

**Áine** Yeah, COP is disorientating for everyone in so many ways. Right? But yeah, as a blind person, I can imagine just needing to be able to figure out where it is that you want to go, is a difficulty in itself. Right? Actually just getting the information and knowing, okay, like this side event that I want to go to is in this room.

**Mostafa** You know, Áine,even if I gave you the conference map, like on the accessible way, for me—because I didn't used to learn about shapes, I didn't used to learn about how to navigate maps even if they are in Braille or tactile, I mean—this for me doesn't make sense because in that in a huge area like this, when you give me a page and telling me, “Okay, this is a conference, tactile interface, please touch it and use it” doesn't make any sense for me.

**Áine** That definitely speaks to the importance of there being volunteers to assist. And alsom it's just challenging, right? Because COP moves around each year.

**Mostafa** The fact that the COP is happening once in each country, either have the chance unless you are really connected with the country before and after you to take from and provide them lessons learned, which could be taken to the next level.

**Áine** So in amongst the chaos of COP, you know, where you have all the main countries’ negotiations, and you have all the side events and everything, and you were sort of organizing or, you know, partaking in some of those side events and also discussions with other disabled people—what did you take away from COP? What did you feel like you learned? What stuck with you after that couple of weeks?

**Mostafa** Number one: we have a great opportunity to document or demand and show our case. If we advocated more and participated more on events, if we shared our challenges and shared our demands and we didn't give up. This is, I think, one thing, because I wouldn't imagine that the Ministry of Social Solidarity in Egypt *would* invite the disabled people to speak to and learn about their feedback, if you don't have people participating. So, because we have [a] good participation of disabled people, we managed to show our case quite well.

I think the second thing is: that [it] is really, really important for disabled people to participate within the COP—that designing phase. Because if you are participating starting from January, with committees organizing, you will be able to influence the infrastructure, the events, the accessibility spaces for disabled people to meet and so on and so forth. We still have miles to go to document the rights of disabled people equally to others. You know, the problem here is that we are not talking about rights of education. We are not talking about rights of employment, we are talking about disabled peoples’ rights in disasters. Countries are really stressed, because in disasters they try to sort out many problems—all of them are really urgent. And for them to look at disability issues within the same level of support, and importance and efficiency, means that disability should be at the core and heart of their thinking, not “on top of the cake”; disability should be part of the “cake”, not the cherry. Because when you have poverty situations and evacuation crisises, the people maybe will not think of human rights. And we all know what happened in COVID-19 when many, many countries refused to take disabled people and provide them with beds, and preferred to take non-disabled people. They have that medical perspective of disability. So, this is why I said we have to fight more, we have to advocate more. We have to collectively [be] able to have strong disability movements in our countries, because I think part of our failures are related to the fragility of our disability movements in many countries as well.

**Áine** That leads on nicely to the theme of capacity-building of disabled people's organizations, which I know that you've taken a great interest in and worked on. What techniques do you think are useful, or could really help disabled people's organizations to get a better sense of the kind of advocacy priorities within disaster risk reduction, also within sort of general climate action?

**Mostafa** I would summarize some takeaways that I believe are important, or that I have faced or seen during my work with DPOs. Definitely, as you said, solidarity and and empowerment of disability movements is really, really important. But in order for this to happen, you have to make sure that each individual working in DPOs, like in the board or maybe chair of [a] DPO, [is] really believing on the idea of working together. Working individually is important, but working with [a] DPO is more powerful. Working with one DPO is important, but aligning more than one DPO, together, is more powerful. Working with one impairement is important, but working with more than one empowerment together is also powerful. So, having that said, I have seen lots of DPOs’ efforts are scattered, because some DPOs believe that they don't want to share. They don't want to share funding proposals, they don't want to share opportunities. They don't want to share working together. They believe that if they have worked alone, they will succeed more—which shouldn't be the case.

The second thing is that lots of DPOs are not connected with international organizations, they don’t know how to write English. For example, if we are talking about Arab countries, they don’t know how to be connected with international organizations. So this failure of connection is policymakers and international organizations—failure of capacities. Either it is admin, financial, technical networking, [this] affects their ability to participate and reach, and therefore, you may find 1, 2, 3 DPOs in each country are really known and able to participate in each conference or proposal. But you have *loads* of them lagging behind because of their capacities. Some other organizations as well would like to do things: they would like to work, they would like to advocate for the rights of disabled people, but they don’t know how. So, I think this it important to, not only provide them with training, actually, because if I take Egypt as an example, lots of those organizations are already trained. But what about coaching? What about evaluating and monitoring their work after that training? What about the project that solely designed to support disability movements?

I think the final important issue that even at the regional level—and I won’t say names here—but even at the regional level, you will find organizations say, “Okay, we are the organization of disabled people on the European region” or “We are the regional organization for disabled people on the Arab region.” But the degree to which this organization really reflects the voice of DPOs at national, mid-level and grassroot-level is really, really important. Because if five or six people say “We are representing this region, but they don't have enough connections” or, maybe, group of DPOs that they are really representing and they are able to listen to the voices of DPOs in each of these countries. This is really cartoonist, not a real powerful regional DPO, reflecting different countries’ demands and problems. And we have seen that in many situations, which is why this shouldn't be the case. I hope, that one day, we will be able to have a regional or national disability movement with hierarchy and with elections, and you will be able to elect DPOs—from grassroots or mid-level to a national, to a regional level and everyone would be represented.

**Áine** Yeah, you speak really powerfully there to a lot of the upstream, systemic reasons why our capacity might be lower, across the board really, for DPOs. And then for topics which haven't gotten as much attention in the past, then it's obviously just, that problem is exacerbated. And I think what you said as well about having a training, but not seeing a training within the context of a follow-up of, did that make sense to people? What effect did it have? Has it been embedded in the DPO so that next cohort of people coming through will actually also get the training? Is it localized to the context? And so on. So I think that's all very, very relevant. I know some of the listeners to this podcast will be people working within international NGOs that interface in some way with disability, whether or not they're DPOs, and also from the Global North. And I wondered if you had any advice for people in that situation thinking about what can they actually do to support capacity-building of DPOs, whether that be financial or in other project-based ways? Yeah.

**Mostafa** We are talking about inclusion here; so therefore, the role of allies is really, really important. The role of NGOs working with DPOs is really needed. We need non-disabled people. We need non-disabled expertise. We need international organizations to work with us. We don't mean to exclude ourselves from the community and work together, but we need others. We have, however, this concept of “nothing about us without us,” which means that we need these organizations to empower our DPOs, to be in the front, and people to support them from behind. Definitely, all of what you said is really important. Supporting them financially, going the extra mile to speak with, and teach DPOs and go to them, help them a little bit to apply for projects, make the project applications a little bit easier.

Sometimes, the complexity of application stands as a barrier for DPOs to apply for, and I have seen that with some international organizations who I was working as a lead consultant with. So, this is really, really important. Making things in Arabic, or maybe in French, or maybe in the Bengali language, rather than only in English, because this is one barrier for people [who] are experts in their field, but don’t know English. And they wouldn't be able to learn English that easily, also. So, if we managed to facilitate and simplify the process in a way that suits people with different capacities, and maybe going the extra mile with them—I think that would be useful.

And actually, you asked a good question earlier about DPOs' role in disaster planning, and I believe that organizations such as UNDRR and other organizations are really, really crucial here. Because it's great to work in a high level; it's great to work with policymakers and think tanks, but it's also great to make some efforts using their country offices or regional focal points to collect thoughts from disabled activists, who face a lot and would be able to use their challenges as a milestone for recommendations to support UNDRR work as well. So this is really, really important, I think, as well.

**Áine** Yeah, thank you so much for all of these insights. Is there anything else that haven't talked about yet that you would like to talk about?

**Mostafa** Well, unfortunately, we, as disabled people, always do extra efforts to say, “Yes, we can do it. We are here.” We would be able to do that if the opportunity is given to us—just try. So, I think that builds natural resistance, because you would be able to do what you like to do, convincing people only if you have that from inside. So I'm not talking about the impairment here, but I'm talking as well about the personal characteristics, which is different from one person to other exactly as their needs. Like impairment needs are also different. When I have traveled to the UK—I have to say, it's my first time ever to travel outside Egypt, and it was my first time to travel, it was to the UK straight away. Different language, different environments, different atmosphere, different attitudes, different everything. It was really hard at the beginning to manage, not only because I'm a blind person, but because it's my first time to travel—which is normal. And this is why we always have to focus on the differences, regardless of the impairment. Sometimes it *is* difficult because of other cultural, or attitudinal, or economic different situations.

I have created a YouTube channel which which I believe [is] an important milestone in my journey. I've benefited from traveling to different countries to raise awareness to those people who are not working in the disability field, people who are not working in development, to speak about accessibility through examples of videos not related to the disabilities, or my YouTube channel. Sometimes I'm doing adventures, sometimes I'm reviewing food, sometimes I'm doing different things for the purpose of telling people that we are here. We can do everything, like you, and we cannot do some stuff, also like you. And it makes it makes [a] lot of difference because people's comments and questions always show that a lot needed to be taught or learned about disability. And finally, I believe that my impairment, my lived experience with disability and my work in the field tells me to continue working in that field. You know, if you have these three elements going together side by side all of your life, I think that means this is a message to me that I have found a good field to work [in] and [to] continue supporting. Advocating for the rights of disabled people with definitely other fantastic experts working as well.

**Áine** Mostafa, thank you so much for your insights and your time. I really appreciate it.

**Mostafa** I thank you for the opportunity, and I wish you all the best for all of your fantastic journeys.

**[Lightly rhythmic major key guitar music, with watery/peaceful nature sounds underneath, same as intro. Music volume fades as Áine talks]**

**Áine** Please help us spread the word about Enabling Commons. Share it with a friend or link to it in your organization's newsletter. With thanks to Rose Paquet for producing transcripts and podcast promotion. The music is composed and produced by Sam Morgan. Audio production and hosting is by me, Áine Kelly-Costello. To find out more about the intersections of disability and climate change, visit disabilityinclusiveclimate.org.

[Music comes up to foreground briefly again before fading out]