



Science for social justice: Thinking more broadly about inclusion

In the previous issue of the Journal, we alluded to the World Science Forum, which was due to take place in Cape Town in December 2022. The event was lively and well attended, and many of the delegates commented on the value of a face-to-face meeting; for many of us this was the first in-person meeting since the start of the COVID-19 lockdown. As ever, many of the interesting discussions were those which took place informally and sometimes by chance, not in prepared sessions.

The theme of the Forum was 'Science for Social Justice', and on 9 December 2022, the text of the Declaration of the 10th World Science Forum on Science for Social Justice was adopted. This statement, which we encourage our readers to read and engage with, presents Science for Social Justice as "a responsibility, an opportunity and a commitment" and is organised under key themes, all globally relevant, and especially so to our African context. These key themes are:

1. Science for human dignity – What role for science in fighting poverty, unemployment, inequality and exclusion?
2. Science for climate justice – How can science working with civil society lead the way in correcting the failure of climate policy?
3. Science for Africa and the world – How to unleash the potential of African science in global cooperation?
4. Science for diplomacy – How can science reboot multilateralism and global solidarity?
5. Justice in science – How to ensure science reflects the society we want?

The Declaration concludes with a commitment by all parties:

We accept our mutual responsibility to ensure integrity and respect for the ethical conduct of science.

We commit to respond decisively to the "Science for Social Justice" Call to Action as set out in this Declaration.

There are those who, understandably, may regard the Declaration and the commitments therein with a degree of cynicism – statements are easy to make but much more difficult to implement and monitor. We believe that it may be more useful, though, to regard the Declaration as an ongoing challenge to all of us in the science community in Africa, and to take on the responsibility of engaging with it in our work. There may be fears that the Declaration is calling for an unreasonable amount of outside interference in what scientists study. Given the emphasis in the statement on the application of science to questions of social justice, for example, some may be concerned that this may create an impression that basic science is less valued than more applied scientific work. This question is in fact addressed directly in the Declaration:

We call for increased investment in education and science, recognizing that basic science, as celebrated by the International Year of Basic Sciences for Sustainable Development, constitutes the foundations of future innovations, economic prosperity, and societies strengthened by solidarity and democracy.

Our reading of the Declaration is that it is less focused on prescribing to scientists what we should do than on asking us to engage with important questions.

It is inevitable with any brief portmanteau statement on matters of great range and complexity that some issues will be left out and glossed over. As a Journal we would welcome the opportunity to consider commentaries on the Declaration which examine it critically. We encourage our readers to help all of us in the science community to keep thinking actively about what 'Science for Social Justice' means in a world which is patently not socially just, and in which access to the world of science and the benefits it brings is not equally distributed.

In the spirit of constructive engagement with the Declaration, one useful way of enlivening the debates may be through considering what is missing or glossed over. As we have noted in our previous *Leader*, as a journal we are committed to inclusion, and we have put policies and practices in place to help support inclusion. One aspect of inclusion which may be read as implicit but is not stated in the Declaration, is that of disability inclusion. South Africa, along with most other African countries, has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD), and the African Disability Protocol is gaining traction. Declarations like the UNCPRD (the full text of which can be found [here](#)) are internationally binding instruments but, in our experience, are not widely known (and, indeed, may be treated with some of the cynicism we mentioned earlier regarding aspirational statements). According to the World Health Organization, about 1.3 billion people – 16% of the world's population – experience a significant disability. There is a well-established relationship between disability and poverty. Extractive labour practices, environmental degradation, and common social features of unequal societies such as high rates of interpersonal violence, accidents, and exposure to toxins, are all associated with higher rates of disability. The focus for disability inclusion should not be solely or primarily on bodily impairments but on barriers to participation. For example, if a wheelchair user cannot be employed to work in a campus building which does not have a lift, the problem is with the building and not with the body of the wheelchair user. Similarly, if a website is inaccessible to users with visual impairments, this is a problem of poor design, not of visual impairment. And, most importantly, perhaps, if people with disabilities are discriminated against or thought not able to participate in society, this is a question of social relationships and not of problems with bodily impairments.

Watermeyer¹, a South African academic and scientist with a severe visual impairment, shows that lack of equal access to print material, or to this material in accessible format, may lead to a range of consequences, both personal and professional, for academics who have much to offer the world of science but experience barriers. Similarly, Lourens² describes the extra, and commonly hidden, labour that disabled academics may have to undertake to do the same work as others and to be seen as competent. The issues of exclusion and discrimination in science and the academy will be familiar to those concerned with important questions of race and gender bias. Most likely, and importantly, all South African scientists will have at some stage learned something about racial and gender discrimination in the academy; in our experience, though, disability discrimination is much less commonly discussed and is often not mentioned at all.

In line with this, in the Declaration on 'Science for Social Justice', the issues of racial and gender exclusion are, correctly, mentioned explicitly. Disability is not. In the planning and registration materials for the World Science Forum, as far as we have been able to see, delegates were not asked what their accessibility needs were. We did not see closed captioning or sign language interpreting in the sessions, for example. If disability is not thought about, not mentioned, or seen as a 'boutique' or special interest issue, this can have an impact on who participates and who contributes. For science to be inclusive, it is important to think about all forms of exclusion, and about how to address them. We need to be clear that we are harnessing the talents of all scientists and, more importantly, all potential scientists with disabilities, just as we need to harness the talents of more women in science, for example. When planning and conducting research, we need to think about the accessibility of this research to disabled people as research participants and beneficiaries of research. Science for social justice is an issue of inclusion for all, and requires contributions from as many diverse groups as possible.

References

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