

# NEWSLETTER

## Engaging girls and young women with disabilities across Southern spaces

### Introduction

In this first newsletter of the ENGAGE project, we provide a snapshot of the research and partnership activities that our team members have collectively organized and conducted over the first stage of the project. In a fast-changing globalizing context where many cultures and societies around the world have continued to deal with many unprecedented and unpredictable impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the collective knowledge, research, and activism from different spaces in the global South are critical for countering and transforming feelings of pain, loss, despair, and injustice that the entire world has encountered.

In this newsletter, we introduce research activities and reflections from three project sites. These include: A Luoi (Vietnam), Uthukela District, KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa), and West Bengal (India). It is our hope that this newsletter can provide you with a glimpse of hope for the emergence of new and exciting forms of learning and praxis with young women and girls with disabilities across these Southern spaces.

The ENGAGE project, as its name illuminates, is the first transnational research project which connects three post-colonial spaces – India, Vietnam, and South Africa. Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) within a Partnership Development Project (2021-2024), ENGAGE provides a unique interdisciplinary and decolonial disability studies network which supports and facilitates knowledge, research, and activism of and by young women and girls with disabilities within and across these Southern spaces.



While this work is collective and ongoing, we reserve this space for reflections from researchers, research assistants, partners, and disability activists from the global South. Learning with and from the global South, thus, determinately prioritizes ways of knowing, observations, and articulations from Southern contexts. The research acts as decolonial praxis to transform unjust social relations within each of these societies, as well as between the Global North/South.

Clearly, the pandemic has required us to re-think our research and praxis in new ways. These include new forms of interaction and engagement with partners, students, and other team members. It also creates new ways of doing and re-imagining research-as-praxis that builds a different sense of community. While many of our friends and partners in the Global North and South are still dealing with daily consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, they have been actively involved in engaging and organizing various research, networking, and activist activities in support of our research initiatives and process. Without their active involvement, assistance, and advice, we would not have been able to complete the first stage of this project.

#### About the DDSC

*The Decolonial Disability Studies Collective (DDSC), led by Dr. Xuan Thuy Nguyen from Carleton University, comprises a group of disabled and nondisabled researchers and activists from both the global south and the global north. The DDSC currently has four ongoing projects – including the ENGAGE project – each of which seeks to centre the knowledges and experiences of people with disabilities from the Global South, while creating new forms of collective learning, engagement, and transformation.*

## South Africa



June 17, 2022- The ENGAGE project officially launched in Empangeni in Northern KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It began with a day of speeches and pledges of support from stakeholders such as the South African Disability Alliance, Zululand Mental Health Society, and participating schools (Thuthukani Special School for intellectual disabilities in Empangeni and Vuleka School for the Deaf at Nkandla).

The launch was followed by a two-day workshop involving disability stakeholders and researchers from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). On the first day, representatives from the disability sector provided training on how researchers might interact respectfully and efficiently with persons with disability. On the second day, the research team, led by Prof Lebo Moletsane, provided introductory training on participatory and arts-based research methods, and the group explored the most relevant tools and methods that could be used with persons with various disabilities.

The launch ended with a two-day data generation workshop with the girls and young women in Empangeni. These workshops included several drawing and cellfilm activities in which the girls broke into two groups and each produced a film about the experiences of girls with disabilities in South Africa. The girls who had various disabilities and came from different schools interacted and collaborated using both the local language (Zulu) and South African Sign Language with each other and within their films.

### Reflections from South Africa:

Thandile Butana (Blind SA project coordinator) states that the ENGAGE project will help stakeholders connect with real issues, enabling policy contributions that are more relevant and responsive. As Butana stated, "if we work together, this project can make a difference in the mind-set of communities and policy-makers".

*"We look forward to learning how to overcome challenges and gain new skills. We will take the new skills we learn back to our peers at school",*

*-A participant from Thuthukani Special School (2022)*

*"I am excited to meet all the contributors to the project and happy to meet other participants with disabilities from another school, as this was the first-time meeting girls with other kinds of disabilities. I look forward to learning to communicate with them".*

*-A participant from Vuleka School for the Deaf (2022)*

*"Many young girls and women with disabilities face the triple burden of poverty, inequality, and unemployment. They do not have access to services and are most vulnerable, especially during this COVID pandemic and this period of rising gender-based violence in our communities. The research and possible interventions that will follow from this project will empower these women and girls with disabilities to advocate for the protection and promotion of their basic human rights."*

*-Jace Nair, project partner and CEO of Blind South Africa*

# Vietnam

April 2022- The first workshop in A Luoi, Vietnam aimed to engage girls and young women with disabilities through participatory methodologies such as photovoice, cellphilm and dancing as a means of critical knowledge production. Through these activities, girls and women with disabilities were encouraged to talk about their perspectives on societal problems and discuss possible solutions. The activities were also designed to promote knowledge mobilization through community involvement in exhibitions of the girls' photos and cellphilms.

The engagement was insightful, and the participants brought up many issues related to their communities, such as environmental pollution, domestic violence, and economic hardships. The ability to recognize some issues in their communities proved crucial for the development of leadership, and participants showed growing awareness and confidence in these areas throughout the workshop.



## Reflections from Vietnam:

*"I feel as though I have accomplished something that I never thought were possible for me. I have a chance to draw pictures and take photos. It is very enjoyable."*

-A participant from A Luoi, Thua Thien Hue, Vietnam (2022)

*"I want to thank everyone for their questions to me, which have helped me, in part, to speak out for myself and make a community film. Due of the inspirations, I will strive more. Nothing makes me happier than when someone understands me."*

-A participant from A Luoi, Thua Thien Hue, Vietnam (2022)

*"During thought exercises, participants had the opportunity to give their opinions and to begin to define their place in the community. That was a good way to provide young women and girls with disabilities with opportunities to learn, connect, and promote social change in their community. Many participants showed increased confidence and were able to pose insightful questions."*

-Nhi Truong, Research Assistant, Vietnam (August, 2022)

*"The ENGAGE project is important because it helps engender feelings of social engagement and active citizenship in women and girls with disabilities, and it will generate a more inclusive society in the South."*

-Dr. Phuong Huynh, Project Partner, Hue University of Sciences, Hue, Vietnam (2022)



# India

*"This workshop has given us the opportunity to learn more about rights of the disabled and how to express ourselves. Never before had anyone asked us what we thought about ourselves or how we identified our own strengths." -A participant from India (October, 2022)*

July 23-25, 2022- In West Bengal, the workshops for the ENGAGE Project were initiated through two days of engagement with girls and women with disabilities, with a follow up session of another two days in October (8th and 10th, 2022). There was a mixed group of 20 women and girls with a variety of disabilities, ranging in age from 14 to 30. These girls came from two different areas near Kolkata. These workshops provided the first opportunity for the participants to get to know each other and discuss their lived experiences.

Many of the girls and women with disabilities wanted the workshop to be a space for sharing stories, playing, dancing, singing songs and drawing - in other words, a space to enjoy themselves as a group. The activities during the first 2 days were therefore designed to include all these elements to keep participants engaged and comfortable, while still addressing the difficult issues in their lives and supporting their emerging leadership. The workshops included an ice-breaking drawing activity and a photovoice activity. A zine-making activity was conducted in the October session. Within these activities, there were discussions about rights, with some of the participants educating others. Many of the participants were enthusiastic about the discussions concerning their self-definition, dreams, and the difficulties, with several stating that no one had ever asked them to describe these before. Some of the key issues identified by women and girls through this process included difficulties with transportation, access to clean water, and problems within the educational system.

We look forward to beginning our analysis of the data and sharing more about these experiences soon.

## **Reflections from India:**

*"Despite the participants' overall enthusiasm, some participants were a little hesitant in sharing their stories. For example, one of the participants with intellectual disabilities emphatically stated that one's innermost thoughts should not be shared with anyone. This forced us to consider that, although people with intellectual disabilities are sometimes discounted as being unable to regulate what and where to share things, they may on the contrary be conditioned and taught to hide what they are feeling. This may signal a danger to be aware of, wherein even instances of abuse or violation could be hidden, and this is therefore something we need to consider and further explore while doing research in the future."*

-Suchandra Bhaduri, Research Assistant, India.



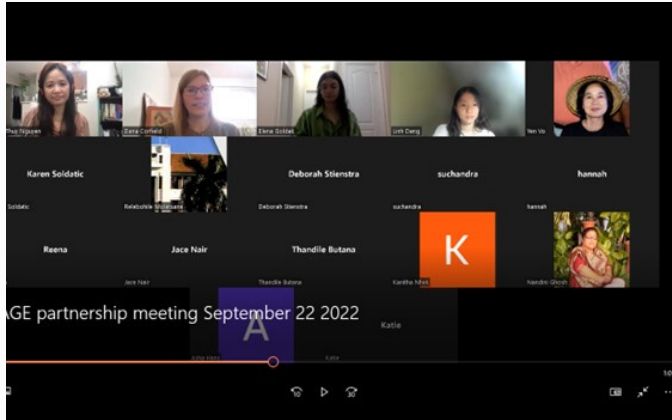
# Other news

## Conference panel

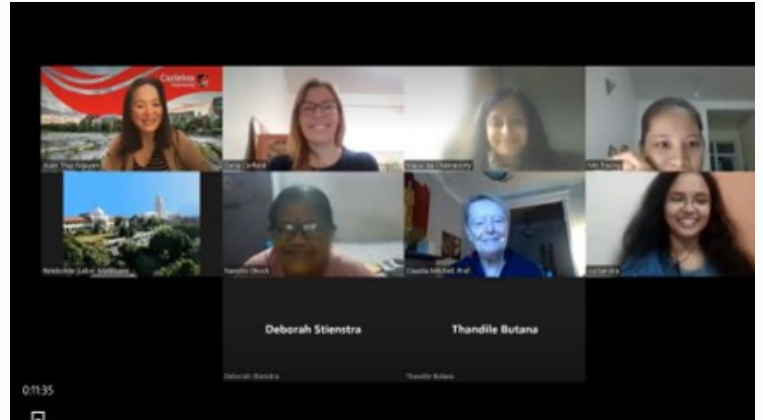
ENGAGE team members Xuan Thuy Nguyen, Dana Corfield, Nilika Mehrotra, Thandile Butana and Katie Aubrecht organized and presented a panel session titled "Conversation with the South: Towards Decolonial Futures?" at the Society for Disability Studies' Multiple Perspectives Conference in April, 2022.

A special issue of the Review of Disability Studies titled Conversation with/through the South: Towards decolonial disability futurities to be guest edited by Xuan Thuy Nguyen, Katie Aubrecht, and Nilika Mehrotra. The call for papers will be coming out shortly.

## Meetings



*In September 2022, we held our annual ENGAGE partnership meeting to discuss our progress and next steps.*



*Following a break during the months of August and September, in October 2022 we resumed our monthly research stream meetings.*

## Partner News

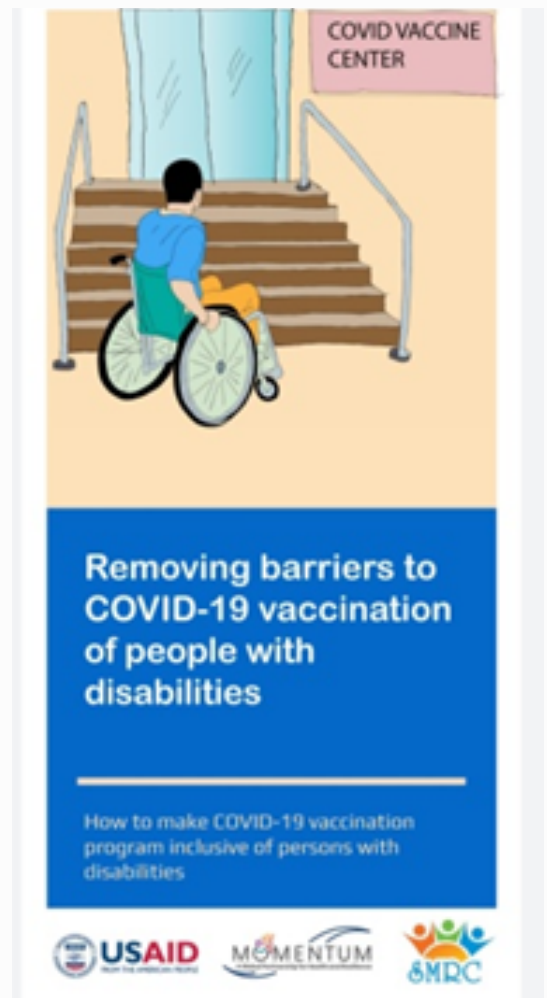
*On September 21, 2022, the Constitutional Court in South Africa issued a landmark ruling supporting the rights to equality, dignity, education, language, and freedom of expression for persons with disabilities. The ruling, which was attributed to the tireless efforts of **Blind South Africa**, a national Disabled People's Organization, and several local activist groups, challenged the 1978 Copyright Act that sparked the "book famine" for people print and visual disabilities in South Africa. The Act required persons with disabilities to secure copyright permissions from holders in order to convert books and reading materials to accessible formats. Failure to do so opened persons with disabilities up to civil and criminal charges. These time-consuming and costly legal barriers greatly limited the accessibility of materials. The court's ruling, which deemed the Act unconstitutional due to its unfair discrimination on the basis of disability, mandated an immediate release of the copyright authorization requirement for persons with disabilities, and gave parliament a 2-year window to reform their copyright legislation. This historic victory therefore marks the end of the book famine and set a momentous precedent to upholding the rights to equality and non-discrimination for persons with disabilities.*

## Partner news

Chumki Datta, the president of ENGAGE project partner **Shanta Memorial Rehabilitation Centre (SMRC)** from Odisha, India, was recently awarded the 'Shakti Award' from the government of Odisha for contributing and making a difference in society.

Working in the field of disability and disability rights since 1985, SMRC established the Women with Disabilities India Network in 2012 to advocate for disability rights and has worked in coordination with USAID to develop knowledge of disability rights among women with disabilities in rural areas. More recently, the organization has addressed the challenges of accessing COVID-19 vaccination for persons with disabilities, and its advocacy on disability inclusion climate change will take SMRC team to COP 27 in Egypt in November 2022.

These efforts, along with the establishment of producer groups under a brand name Vriddhi, led to the receipt of this important award, which was given on 20 October 2022 at a public ceremony. Congratulations to Chumki Datta and SMRC!



## What's next? Or Upcoming events

- *Coming soon: The Youth Leadership Circle (YLC) - a group consisting of 2 or 3 girls and young women with disabilities from each of the participating countries - begin their bimonthly online meetings in preparation for the upcoming transnational workshop.*
- *November 2022: A zine-making workshop led by ENGAGE research assistant Suchandra Bhaduri from India.*
- *June 2023: We are planning a transnational workshop in Vietnam for the Youth Leadership Circle. Girls and young women with disabilities from each of our three sites will travel to Hue, Vietnam in order to meet in person to discuss and share their experiences with disability and their views on leadership.*

## ENGAGE project partners and collaborators

A Luoi Blind Association (Vietnam)

Blind South Africa (South Africa)

Disabled Women's Network of Canada (DAWN; Canada)

Shanta Memorial Rehabilitation Centre (SMRC; India)

University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN; South Africa)

University of Sciences, Hue University (Vietnam)

Carleton University (Canada)

Western Sydney University (Australia)

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