

## Research Space

Journal article

**Commentary on diversity and inclusion policies in publicly traded  
New Zealand companies: inclusion of people with intellectual  
disabilities**

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**Commentary on diversity and inclusion policies in publicly traded New Zealand companies: inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities.**

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Manuscripts

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3 **Commentary on Diversity and inclusion policies in publicly traded New Zealand companies:**  
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5 **inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities.**  
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10 **Purpose**

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12 This commentary reflects upon the article entitled ‘Diversity and inclusion policies in  
13 publicly traded New Zealand companies: Inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities’.  
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16 **Design/methodology/approach**

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18 This narrative commentary critically reflects upon the Global Reporting Initiative (hereafter,  
19 GRI) itself and what the numbers reported in Guruge’s article say, paying attention to what  
20 we might think and do about such standards and scenarios.  
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26 **Findings**

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28 This commentary does not present a definitive assessment of the GRI. This is because it is  
29 marked by undecidability. Nevertheless, it reads some of the figures, or ‘data’, which register  
30 organisational uptake of GRI standards (or the lack thereof), together with other ‘data’, to  
31 contrive a more stable account.  
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37 **Originality/value**

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39 This commentary strives to avoid presenting a reductive reading of ‘data’ and, instead,  
40 highlights the complex multifaceted dimensions of societies, sustainability, social inclusion,  
41 and disability and possibilities for inclusive practices.  
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## Introduction

Guruge presents insights into the diversity and inclusion policies of 163 companies in New Zealand. These are compared with GRI Standards, a document of almost 1000 pages which is self-stated as having been “developed in the public interest” to “promote sustainable reporting” (GRI, 2023, p. 2). This is defined and measured through various intersecting factors (e.g., waste, security practices, rights of indigenous peoples), although most relevant to the article this commentary refers to is diversity, equal opportunity, and non-discrimination. These (GRI 405 and 406, respectively) contain requirements for organisations to report information about their impact relating to, for example, discrimination (GRI, 2023, p. 714).

Although data means ‘given’, they neither speak for themselves nor stand alone on their own figurative ‘feet’. Accordingly, this commentary strives to make sense of what has been learned through interpretive processes. More specifically, this commentary first provides context to the GRI while highlighting how it has and gives rise to simultaneously conflicting qualities and outcomes in ways which make it marked by undecidability. Then, I present and interpret data registering organisational uptake of GRI standards, or the lack thereof, while not claiming to know the actual practices in the organisations to which Guruge’s article (this issue) refers. Finally, I make more general observations about not only the complex, multifaceted dimensions of societies, social inclusion, and disability but also possibilities for inclusive ontologies and practices.

## Investigating and interpreting the GRI itself

The GRI was initially formed in 1997 in the United States of America by non-profit organisations with the support of The United Nations Environment Programme. However, it has been disappearing in some parts of the world as areas or entities, like the European

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3 Union, subscribe to new sustainability reporting directives (Schwery, n.d.). The United  
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5 Nations organisations purportedly developed the GRI to measure business performances  
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7 “through a unique multi-stakeholder consultative process involving representatives from  
8  
9 organisations and report information users *from around the world*” with the stated intention  
10  
11 to “promote sustainable reporting” (GRI, 2023, p. 2; emphasis added). Subsequently, 74% of  
12  
13 the largest 250 companies in the world use GRI; 111 policies across 50 countries and regions  
14  
15 reference GRI; 30,100 participants have trained through GRI-certified training courses; and  
16  
17 GRI has run sustainable development programmes in 18 developing countries (GRI, 2018).  
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### 24 *A utopian act*

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26 On the one hand, the GRI might index departures from tendencies for companies,  
27  
28 societies, and governing institutions to define themselves—and be defined—using narrow,  
29  
30 problematic, criticised, and perhaps even fictional and harmful measures of economic  
31  
32 success. These ideas, which societies and people live by, include notions like capital and  
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34 profit, labour, land, and money (e.g., Polanyi, 1944 [2001], p. 71ff.). Arguably, the central  
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36 character within the stories which societies have told about themselves is a single numerical  
37  
38 form: the gross domestic product (GDP), which, as Lorenzo Fioramonti explains, “is built on  
39  
40 a great lie. This lie says that ... what does not involve a formal financial transaction based on  
41  
42 money, does not count – no matter how important it may be for ... social ... wellbeing”  
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44 (Fioramonti, 2014, p. 15).  
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49 The GRI could indicate a shift in how capitalism works by moving away from an  
50  
51 obsessive focus on profit and singular measurements and towards other measures of value  
52  
53 that promote accountability and transparency. The GRI may thus partake in stories which  
54  
55 register and generate notions of sustainability as happening at the “interface” between “the  
56  
57 social ... economic ... [and] ecological” (Baker, 2006, p. 7).  
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6 *Dystopian simulations*  
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8           Read differently, however, the GRI may be regarded alongside symptoms like  
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10 tokenism and tick-boxism, which shape societies and lives through the numbers they become  
11 implicated in producing. Organisations and persons are obliged or coerced to contribute to  
12 these fabrications through forms of governmentality which encompass “endeavours to shape,  
13 guide, direct the conduct of others ... and to govern oneself” (Foucault, 1982, pp. 220-221)  
14 and performativity, “a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and  
15 displays as a means of incentive, control, attrition and change” (Ball, 2003, p.216). As Ball  
16 explains, performativity is “a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs  
17 judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change –  
18 based on rewards and sanctions” (2003, p. 216).  
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30           The disturbing qualities of these numbers and the conduct they seem to engender are  
31 accentuated when considering studies which suggest that companies become “Disabled  
32 Confident Employers” as a “public relations stunt” rather “than as an indicator of who is an  
33 employer of choice for disabled people” (Olsen, 2022, p. 5) and that signifiers of inclusivity  
34 and inclusive practices may index organisations in which *no* disabled people are employed  
35 (Hoque, 2019).  
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45           These numbers, and the performativity they seem to promote, become even more  
46 alarming when the GRI is seen through a wider lens. This brings into focus the hierarchical  
47 power and knowledge systems that underpin it and the western ideologies which implicitly  
48 appear to posit that the agents of Capitalism (e.g., corporations) which have produced—and  
49 benefitted from—crises have a role in adapting to enable the continuation of industrial  
50 production and growth which brought about the crises in the first place. The GRI and the  
51 agents who produced it may, therefore, be regarded as re-storying themselves so that the  
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3 engineers of unsustainability and inequality are recast as saviours. These stories, and the  
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5 practices they register and generate, make roles for petty plain-clothed capitalists and  
6  
7 profiteers of disadvantage and marginalisation. Armed with stylus pens, algorithms, and  
8  
9 automated email replies, these people occupy spaces and come to judge and police the  
10  
11 borders and hinterlands of normalcy and abnormalcy through technologies of control like  
12  
13 excel spreadsheets and performance reviews.  
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16  
17 This centralised and centralising story—with the architects of the modern world cast  
18  
19 as protagonists (e.g., The United Nations, World Health Organisation) and a supporting  
20  
21 workforce which operationalises targets set by ruling authorities—may also eclipse, and write  
22  
23 over, not only other local, alternate ways of formulating, measuring, practising, and perhaps  
24  
25 even imagining sustainability and development and progress but also possible, hitherto  
26  
27 untold, futures themselves. The GRI, as a single, arguably colonial, story may, for example,  
28  
29 suppress other stories like “2030 and Counting”, a global reporting initiative led by people  
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31 with disabilities who collect and collate stories through citizen reporting networks in Kenya,  
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33 the Philippines and Zambia (On our radar, 2020).  
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### 40 **Thinking by—and with—numbers and words**

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42 Data registering organisational uptake of GRI standards (or the lack thereof) may, on  
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44 the one hand, disclose that 25.7% of companies stated they provide equal opportunities to *all*  
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46 employees. while, on the other hand, reveal that only 1.84% of companies met all GRI  
47  
48 standards (Guruge, 2023; this issue). In other sources, it is possible to read that 75% of  
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50 Global Fortune 250 companies reported applying the GRI reporting framework, citing  
51  
52 examples of good sustainability reporting practices (Safari and Areeb, 2020, p. 344).  
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56 These numbers may be supplemented by the words of disabled employees in  
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58 workplaces obliged to fulfil duties to make reasonable adjustments as stipulated in the United  
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3 Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). These suggest  
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5 discriminations exist even in contexts with purported (reasonable) adjustments and  
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7 accommodations (Olsen, 2022). For example, one interviewee described “uninformed  
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9 managers” and being made so uncomfortable as to leave employment, while another talked of  
10  
11 rude managers and a lack of compassion (Olsen, 2022, pp. 8-9). Meanwhile, in Iceland,  
12  
13 people with intellectual disabilities are documented as experiencing persistent  
14  
15 marginalisation concerning work and employment, with researchers not only distinguishing  
16  
17 between the mere presence of people with disabilities but also identifying potential for  
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19 meaningful participation (Hafsteinsdóttir and Hardonk, 2023).  
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24         Such accounts may be further illuminated by persistent indicators that suggest  
25  
26 disabled people experience substantially lower employment rates and much higher  
27  
28 unemployment rates than their non-disabled peers. In Kenya, for example, the employment  
29  
30 rate for persons with disabilities is approximately 1% compared to 73.8% for the general  
31  
32 population. At the same time, the situation is worse for persons with learning disabilities,  
33  
34 who are often regarded as “mad” and have little to no chance of employment (Ebuenyi *et al.*,  
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36 2020).  
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40         Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, the disability employment rate was 52.6% from  
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42 July to September 2022, compared with 82.5% for non-disabled people, while the disability  
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44 unemployment rate was 7.2% from July to September 2022, compared to 3.2% for non-  
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46 disabled people (Department of Work and Pensions [DWP], 2023). In the year ending June  
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48 2021, however, people with ‘severe’ or ‘specific’ learning disabilities and autism had much  
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50 lower employment rates in the United Kingdom, amounting to 26.2% and 29% (an estimate),  
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52 respectively (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2021). Perhaps even more disturbing is the  
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54 only 9 per cent of employers in the UK who believe there are compelling reasons for hiring  
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3 disabled people and the 34 per cent of employers who do not believe disabled people possess  
4 the ability to do the job (The Centre for Social Justice, 2017, pp. 9–11).  
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### 10 • **Thinking beyond yet nevertheless *with* numbers and words**

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12 The persistent marginalisations and stratifications suggested by the words and  
13 numbers presented in this commentary may result from three factors.  
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17 First, the data indexes the limits of top-down directives. This is because policy and directives  
18 from ‘above’ enter spaces (e.g., workplaces, supermarkets, buses) where they encounter  
19 people, ideas, and practices. Policies and legislation live social lives.  
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24 Second, the persistent marginalisations and stratifications may index the pervasiveness of  
25 exclusionary ideologies (e.g., ableism, disablism, dis/ableism) and the practices they inform.  
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27 These limit the ways people with disabilities might not only benefit from but also contribute  
28 to inclusive and innovative workplaces.  
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33 Third, the data may index the complex and multidimensional qualities of the ‘things’  
34 the GRI either enters or seems to strive to realise and accomplish. A case in point is the  
35 ‘thing’ we call society, a term which stands for complex processes and intersecting structures  
36 which frame and shape people’s lives, albeit without determining them.  
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43 Equally complex is disability, which may be regarded as “an emergent property,  
44 located ... in ... the interplay between the biological reality of physiological impairment,  
45 structural conditioning ... and sociocultural interaction/elaboration” (Williams, 1999, p. 810).  
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47 Meanwhile, inclusion cannot be delivered by such persons as policymakers but is, “a process  
48 of struggle that has to be joined” (Oliver, 1996, p. 90). Inclusion requires societies to rethink  
49 how they do *everything*. In contrast to integration which is often conceived “as a state to be  
50 achieved by setting targets in terms of numbers”, inclusion demands confronting and  
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3 critiquing how “capitalism has marked and excluded impaired bodies as worthless” (Cameron  
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5 2014, p. 79).  
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8 To be sure, more positive outcomes may be realised through initiatives working at and  
9  
10 from the bottom-up. In addition to that already mentioned (i.e., “2030 and Counting”), we  
11  
12 may identify an increasing appreciation in workplaces of diversity as an asset and discourse  
13  
14 *by* people with disabilities about how to make inclusive spaces *for* people with disabilities.  
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16 These include asking questions; accelerating the provision of unbiased training for all  
17  
18 employees; “putting together in-house performance management guidelines for managers”,  
19  
20 which help to ameliorate the potential negative impact of the ambiguity of notions like  
21  
22 “reasonable adjustments” in legislation like The Equality Act; setting up disability networks  
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24 to signpost whom employees can talk to; as well as pointing to the presence of organisations  
25  
26 which support private and public sector organisations to introduce disabled employee groups;  
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28 and efforts to surpass “tick-box disability policy” (Dobinson, 2013). Meanwhile, scholarly  
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30 literature addresses how inclusive workplaces *can* be fostered (Khan *et al.*, 2022).  
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35 However, as outcomes are limited when bottom-up tactics work in isolation from top-  
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37 down strategies, so there are constraints to thinking and practice based on a binary logic of  
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39 top-down *and* bottom-up, even when they work in conjunction. More inclusive ontologies  
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41 may only emerge through less two-dimensional and more multidimensional visions and  
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43 practices which are cognisant of not only the complex qualities of society, disability, social  
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45 inclusion, and sustainability but also how these ‘things’ are accomplished between people in  
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47 everyday spaces.  
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51 Nevertheless, efforts to make inclusion from the top-down, bottom-up, side-to-side,  
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53 and inside-out will only ever be partial while impairment is regarded as a “deficit” and as  
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55 “something ‘wrong’ *with* disabled people” (e.g., Cameron, 2014, p. 79-80; emphasis added)  
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and not as being produced by and embedded in exclusionary societies. It is, therefore, vital to confront and critique oppressions embedded in places and perhaps ourselves.

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