



Students in a classroom in Kenya. Credit: ICS



## Inclusion in education

This paper briefly explores the global context for inclusive education as it relates to children and young people with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries. It outlines the main challenges to ensuring the right to education for all is realised and considers ways forward. It will inform the plenary discussion on Inclusive Education at the Global Disability Summit on 24 July and serves as a background document for all attendees.

The Global Disability Summit is bringing the international community together to share learning, make new commitments and place inclusion for people with disabilities at the heart of international development. As well as Inclusive Education, the Summit will focus on three further themes critical for inclusive development: Dignity and Respect for All, Routes to Economic Empowerment and Harnessing Technology and Innovation.

## 1. Introduction

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Everyone has the right to education.<sup>1</sup> However, despite global progress in achieving universal access to education, more than half the 65 million children with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries are not in school. They face multiple barriers to receiving an education including inaccessible schools, inaccessible teaching materials, prejudice and discrimination from teachers and bullying from peers. The situation is particularly concerning for girls with disabilities.

Globally, we are facing a learning crisis. Not only are children out of school, but once in school, they are failing to learn. Children with disabilities experience lower levels of enrolment, attainment and literacy. The attainment gaps between children with disabilities and children without disabilities are growing, and children with disabilities are being left behind.<sup>2</sup>

There is not enough investment in education globally and many governments consider investment in inclusive education costly, citing resource constraints. However, the opportunity costs to the economy and health sector of children being out of school provide a powerful argument for increased investment in education that promotes inclusion of all children.

## 2. The global framework

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The right to education is clearly defined in international policy and human rights frameworks. The **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** (CRPD) sets out the responsibility of states to provide an inclusive education system at all levels. Article 24 states that people with disabilities have the right to education on an equal basis with others and without discrimination. The CRPD committee's General Comment on inclusive education further articulates the right to education for people with disabilities.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of inclusive education is set out in the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** (Agenda 2030), which places emphasis on quality and learning.<sup>4</sup> Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 promises to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education” and “promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”

## 3. Background

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While significant progress has been made in getting children into school, still only 194 million out of 662 million children (fewer than 30%) are on track to complete secondary school in low- and middle-income countries.<sup>5</sup> The situation is significantly worse for the 65 million children with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries, who experience lower educational outcomes than children without disabilities. Twice as many girls as boys never start school.<sup>6</sup> The quality of the education children receive if in school is also poor. Globally, 125 million children fail to acquire basic literacy or numeracy after four years in school. In conflict-affected areas, 63 million children are out of school as they struggle to find safe, non-violent learning environments.<sup>7</sup> Children's educational outcomes are so low in many countries that skills gaps with high-income countries are emerging that will restrict access to 21st century jobs and opportunities.

Today, around 33 million children with disabilities are not in school – more than 50% of the total number of out-of-school children.<sup>8</sup>

Schools and education systems that exclude children and young people with disabilities can leave them in a cycle of poverty and inequality that extends throughout adulthood.<sup>9</sup> Without the foundational skills they need for work, many young people with disabilities find themselves

unemployed or stuck in low-wage, unstable, informal-sector jobs that offer them few opportunities to strengthen their skills and improve their income.<sup>10</sup> Excluding children with disabilities from school leads to their social isolation from friends, families, communities and broader society.

## 4. Challenges to inclusive education

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There is a range of factors that intersect and influence whether all children and young people with disabilities can learn, including gender, ethnic, cultural and economic background, health, and exposure to conflict, poverty and disorder.<sup>11</sup> For children with disabilities the impact of these influencing factors can be great, the following particularly so.

### Poverty

Poverty is a significant cause of children's exclusion from school. People with disabilities experience higher rates of poverty and so higher rates of exclusion from school than people without disabilities. The costs of education (fees, textbooks, assistive devices, transport or the opportunity costs of the children being out of the house) can be prohibitive for parents, and many have to take decisions about which of their children to educate. Damaging misconceptions that there is little value to educating a child with a disability prevail in some contexts.

### Low expectations

Where children with disabilities are in school, negative attitudes, such as the belief that children with disabilities are incapable of learning, can affect their outcomes and lead to early dropout rates. Low expectations can mean that little attention is paid to whether children with disabilities are actually learning. These negative attitudes can also affect the self-confidence of children with disabilities. *For further discussion, see the Global Summit paper on Dignity and Respect for All.*

### The situation for girls with disabilities

The social and economic returns to education for all girls are clear. Around one-third of the reductions in adult mortality and nearly 15% of the reductions in infant mortality from 1970 to 2010 can be attributed to gains in girls' schooling. Education contributes to increased empowerment and increased participation in public and political life. It also contributes to gains in productivity and increased taxation, leading to increases in national income.

Girls with disabilities have lower school completion rates and lower literacy rates than all other children.<sup>12</sup> Although many girls start primary school, their likelihood of completing it remains low, and this is particularly the case for girls with disabilities. As girls move into adolescence, gender disparities widen. Restrictive social norms about the position of girls in communities and society combined with stigma around disability influence the likelihood of girls with disabilities staying in education and completing secondary school.<sup>13</sup> Girls with disabilities are at an increased risk of violence, which can also lead to families choosing not to send them to school. In conflict settings, the risk of gender-based violence increases for all girls. Lack of water and sanitation facilities in schools adds particular challenges for girls with disabilities, whose inability to manage menstruation in an inaccessible environment can reinforce negative attitudes about their ability to manage in schools.

### Teaching quality

High-quality teachers, classroom assistants and education managers are in short supply. In many countries, average teacher pay has fallen relative to other professions. Many teachers have never been trained on inclusive classroom practices or the use of accessible learning and teaching materials, and have no experience in teaching children with disabilities.<sup>14</sup>

## Bullying and harm

In school, children with disabilities are frequently excluded from friendship groups. They are nearly twice as likely as children without disabilities to be the subject of violence or abuse in and out of school, with girls at higher risk.<sup>15</sup> Bullying in schools, and even just the fear of it, can be a big issue for children with disabilities.

## 5. Delivering inclusive education

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Delivering inclusive education and addressing the global learning crisis will require clear solutions and actions. The following areas are likely to require consideration.

### The enabling environment

An inclusive education system, as set out in the CRPD and Agenda 2030, gives all children quality formal and non-formal learning opportunities within a mainstream system that is adaptive to the needs of all learners. Those countries that have not done so must first ratify the CRPD and introduce or amend national legislation and policies to be in line with it.

### Investment and implementation

For countries that have legislation in place, the challenge is to move beyond policy into practice by implementing the significant changes to legislation, policy, financing, and planning and implementation, as well as the system-level change to offer specific support for children with disabilities that is required to realise inclusive education. At national level, education systems need significant investment to deliver inclusive education. Many governments consider this investment costly, but the benefits are clear. Governments can also seek to broaden engagement with the private sector, civil society and non-traditional donors to support national implementation.

Education strategies and plans should include children and young people with disabilities and accountability mechanisms should be put in place to monitor and review progress.

### Data

Disaggregating data by gender, age and disability is essential to plan education services and to understand the progress of children. It is particularly critical because it enables schools to identify those children and young people who are most at risk of being left behind.<sup>16</sup> Significant efforts are being made to develop and implement research methods that deliver reliable and comparable data on disability, such as the Washington Group Short Set of Questions on Disability,<sup>17</sup> which include a Child Functioning Module for inclusion in surveys or censuses.

Within the education system, Educational Management Information Systems (EMIS) typically focus on enrolment, out-of-school rates, and primary and secondary completion rates. They need to include specific indicators on learning outcomes (e.g. literacy), again disaggregated by sex, age and disability, to provide a better picture of learning. The absence of such national data may disguise educational gaps that exist between children with and without disabilities, as well as between girls and boys.

### Working with DPOs and children and young people with disabilities

Few countries have formal mechanisms to include the views of children and young people with disabilities in national policymaking. As a result, children with disabilities and their families cannot easily engage with governments and decision-makers, and their voices and experiences are not reflected in national policy. In contexts where disability is particularly stigmatised (where children with disabilities are not in school, nor captured in censuses or on routine administrative data) the effective

representation of children's rights is particularly critical. Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have considerable experience in inclusive education and can contribute to national policy development and discourse, and strengthen accountability.

## Early learning

Early childhood education and primary schooling are critical in helping children to develop basic literacy, numeracy and problem solving, as well as the social and emotional skills needed for life-long learning. It is particularly critical for children who are vulnerable to poverty or exposed to violent or chaotic environments. However, many mainstream early childhood education and humanitarian interventions exclude children with disabilities. In humanitarian settings children with disabilities can be excluded from emergency registration systems and often fail to receive basic entitlements such as access to educational activities including ECCE.<sup>18</sup> As a result, children with disabilities are also missing important opportunities for their needs to be identified and assessed, and subsequent referral to essential health and rehabilitation services. As children with disabilities get older, it becomes ever harder for them to make up for a lack of early education and break free from trajectories of low attainment.<sup>19</sup>

## Accessibility

All children should be able to reach school close to their homes, in safety. Once at school, the buildings, facilities, transport, curricula, information and communication, learning materials, teaching methods, assessments, examinations, and language and support systems should also all be accessible.<sup>20</sup> Universal Design in the school environment, infrastructure, services and products can be used to guide and inform better inclusive policy and practice.<sup>21</sup>

Reasonable accommodations, including individual adjustments and modifications that go beyond accessibility standard, should be in place so children with disabilities can participate on an equal basis with other children.<sup>22</sup> Access to assistive technology (AT) and disability-inclusive curricula, and ensuring that the voice and images of people with disabilities are positive in schools, are also vital. Educational materials should be made available in accessible formats, such as Braille, and in easy-to-read and understand forms. Differences in communication and information needs must also be taken into account in order to accommodate the diversity of learners with disabilities.<sup>23</sup> Regular assessment, as a means to adjust teaching and support, is one of the most effective interventions for improving children's learning. However, standard assessments can disadvantage children with disabilities if they are not accessible or children do not have reasonable accommodation. *For further discussion, see the Global Summit paper on Harnessing Technology and Innovation.*

## Teacher support

Teachers are the most important determinant of learning. Teaching assistants and other support staff and school management can also play a critical role for children with disabilities. National education systems need support to restructure pay to compensate teaching staff competitively, to reward good performance and monitor learning outcomes more effectively.

Continuous training, both pre-service and in-service, is vital to give teachers the necessary pedagogical skills and to equip them to assess children's abilities and evaluate their progress. Teacher training institutes can be strengthened and inclusive pedagogies and classroom management techniques can be part of national curricula and standards for teachers. Useful training areas to consider include strategies to promote the participation of children with disabilities; the use of methods, materials, means and formats of communication (including Braille and/or sign language); and the use of AT.



## School governance and leadership

School principals and management committees need the skills, resources and budgets necessary to implement inclusive education. The involvement of parents and children in school governance can be critical. When families and communities work together with the school system, children have better grades, stay in school and develop better social skills and behaviour.<sup>24</sup> Schools with better governance and management have better learning outcomes.

## 6. Questions for consideration

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Through positive collaboration, the Global Disability Summit is an opportunity to catalyse political will and ensure people with disabilities are driving the change required to make inclusive development a reality. The following discussion points<sup>25</sup> are intended to help us clarify ideas and develop next steps to hasten the introduction of fully inclusive education in all countries.

- How do we effectively involve children with disabilities and their families and organisations of people with disabilities to further the inclusive education agenda?
  - How do we develop and train teachers, classroom assistants and school leaders to deliver better, inclusive education?
  - How can adequate financing be budgeted and released to support national systems shifts and implement inclusive education policy, plans and practice?
  - How can we generate and use robust data and evidence for inclusive planning, and ensure accountability?
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