

We want to learn too!

Why urgent action is needed to include children with disabilities in education



Claudia Janke/Sightsavers

Afsath (aged 10, pictured on the right) is blind and attends an inclusive school in Athikunna, India with her best friend Manju.

Despite overall increases in school participation over the past decade, some groups of children continue to be left behind. Chief among these are children with disabilities. One-third of the 75 million children currently out of school have a disability, and 90 per cent of children with disabilities in developing countries do not go to school.¹ Disability has more impact on participation in education than gender, rural residence or household economic status.² Making education more responsive to the needs of children with disabilities is now one of the most pressing concerns if we are to meet the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of universal primary education.

Education as a basic right

With the coming into force of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in May 2008, there has never been a more critical time for the international community to focus on this issue. The Convention reaffirms the right of children with disabilities to a quality education (Article 24), and places an obligation on donor governments to make their international cooperation inclusive of, and accessible to, people with disabilities (Article 32).

Education as a lever of change

Education for children with disabilities is not only a fundamental human right, but essential for poverty alleviation and human development. People with disabilities constitute an estimated one in five of the world's poorest.³ Exclusion from education is a significant factor in the high levels of poverty often experienced by people with disabilities and their families. Denying children with disabilities access to a quality education greatly constrains their opportunities to gain independence and skills. The caring responsibilities associated with disability can also prevent siblings and other family members from engaging in work or attending school.

Yet, with access to education, children with disabilities have the chance to become active and engaged citizens who can shape their own futures and claim their rights in employment, politics and other spheres. As stated in a technical note to the World Bank PRSP Sourcebook, the economic argument for educating children with disabilities is very strong:

'Children with disabilities who are excluded from education are virtually certain to be long-term, life-long poor. They almost inevitably become an economic burden on society and on their families...Education makes a difference in everyone's life, but it makes a much greater relative difference in the lives of children with disabilities. The incremental benefits of educating a child with disabilities far outweigh the incremental costs.'⁴

Benefits of education for children with disabilities and their families

These quotes from surveys in Madhya Pradesh, India, among families with children who have received support to attend school through the state inclusive education programmes, show the value of education for the quality of life of the entire household.

'Now I can also go to school, as I need not stay at home to look after my brother who is blind' (sibling)

'Now that my brother is going to school there is less tension in the family and less fights and scolding at home' (sibling)

'We get more time to relax and the responsibilities have been reduced' (parent)

'Now I feel I can do something' (child with disabilities)

'I want to study further' (child with disabilities)

1 UNESCO, Children with disabilities. Available at <http://www.unesco.org/en/inclusive-education/children-with-disabilities/>

2 Filmer, D. (2005) Disability, Poverty and Schooling in Developing Countries, World Bank: Washington DC

3 UN, Factsheet on people with disabilities. Available at <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=18>

4 Jonsson, T. and Wiman, R. (2001) Education, Poverty and Disability In Developing Countries: A Technical Note Prepared for the Poverty Reduction Sourcebook, World Bank: Washington DC

Inclusive education – raising quality for all

There are numerous examples showing that strategies to help children with disabilities benefit from education can also improve teaching and learning for all children – a key issue given the pressing need to focus on quality. Changes such as increased community and parent involvement, more attention to individual needs and learning styles, and more accessible school environments have benefits beyond children with disabilities. For example, a pilot project for inclusive education developed by the Government of Pakistan and Sightsavers International found that processes such as peer tutoring, co-operative learning groups and team teaching improved education for all children, not just those with disabilities.



Kerstin Hacker/Sightsavers

Loveness (pictured in the middle) is blind and attends Mano Primary School in Zambia with her sighted peers.

What needs to happen?

To achieve the Millennium Development and Education for All goals, fulfil human rights commitments and combat the chronic poverty resulting from the exclusion of children with disabilities from education, governments and donor agencies must make inclusive strategies central to their education plans and international cooperation.

Numerous examples demonstrate the feasibility and benefits of including children with disabilities in education.⁵ Indeed, at the UNESCO conference on Inclusive Education (November 24-28 2008, Geneva) Ministers affirmed 'that inclusive quality education is fundamental to achieving human, social and economic development', and highlighted the 'importance of inclusive education for reducing poverty, and improving health, incomes and livelihoods'. They called upon Member States 'to adopt an inclusive education approach in the design, implementation, monitoring and assessment of educational policies as a way to further accelerate the attainment of Education for All (EFA) goals as well as to contribute to building more inclusive societies'⁶.

Overleaf, we suggest some key actions for donors and national governments, based on the experience of Sightsavers and our partners in developing countries. Many of these recommendations have also been supported by the UN Special Rapporteur on Education, and more detail can be found in his report.⁷

⁵ See, for example, those documented through the Enabling Education Network <http://www.eenet.org.uk/>

⁶ Conclusions and Recommendations of the 48th Session of the International Conference on Education, November 2008

⁷ Muñoz, V. (2007) The Right to Education of Persons with Disabilities: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, A/HRC/4/29. UN, Geneva



Abir Abdullah/Sightsavers

Arif had cataract in both eyes and had two separate operations at Islamia Eye Hospital, Dhaka to save his sight. He can now enjoy school with his friends.

Recommendations

The role of national governments

Many national governments have stated their commitment to inclusive approaches, and are making good strides towards including children with disabilities. The following steps can help governments make progress and fulfil their obligations to deliver the right to education:

- Eliminate legislative or constitutional barriers to children and adults with disabilities being included in the regular education system.
- Ensure that one ministry and school system is responsible for the education of all children and adults.
- Involve marginalised groups in developing and monitoring education plans, particularly disabled people's organisations (DPOs) and parents of children with disabilities.
- Develop strategies which increase community and family involvement in school management, including training and awareness programmes for parents of children with disabilities, and the children themselves, about their rights. Make use of parents' knowledge of the needs of their children.
- Transform existing special education institutions into resources to assist the mainstream system. The expertise of special educators and special schools can support regular teachers and mainstream schools, at district, school and classroom levels.
- Provide pre-service and in-service training to teachers so that they can respond to diversity in the classroom and the needs of each child (for example, using peer support and activity-based approaches). Ensure there is adequate support and expertise in skills such as Braille literacy, and provide for the training and employment of teachers with disabilities.
- Train and orient educational administrators, school leadership, and support staff and communities on the rights of children with disabilities to education and on good practice in inclusion.
- Ensure that schools, curricula, assessment procedures and teaching and learning materials are accessible to all. Budget for and provide assistive devices, such as low vision magnifiers and Braille slates.
- Invest in inclusive early childhood care and education (ECCE) programmes, which provide a foundation for lifelong inclusion of children with disabilities, in education and society.
- Employ an inter-sectoral approach, ensuring links between education institutions and social protection, health and community based rehabilitation.
- Develop mechanisms to monitor exclusion and progress, including disaggregating data on school participation by type of impairment.

The role of international partners

Donor governments must ensure that their support to education does not exclude children with disabilities. Many donors have publicly recognised that the MDGs cannot be met without including people with disabilities (e.g. DFID, World Bank), and Article 32 of the UN CRPD states that international cooperation must be inclusive of and accessible to persons with disabilities. Much of the action needed by donors can be easily integrated within their existing education programmes. Key steps include:

- During budget support and sector dialogue with partner countries, discuss how education programmes will meet the needs of all children, including those with disabilities.
- When consulting on plans or supporting government stakeholder consultations, involve organisations representing children with disabilities. Include DPOs in activities to strengthen civil society capacity to engage in policy dialogue.
- In supporting teaching and learning materials, support systems for the development and supply of accessible formats and assistive devices.
- Ensure teacher training programmes include disability awareness and inclusive approaches for all teachers, and the development of adequate skills in more specialist areas such as Braille literacy.
- In supporting education management information systems, include indicators on disability.
- In all education programme and sector reviews or evaluations, assess the situation of children with disabilities.
- In international dialogue with other donors and multilateral agencies, particularly the Fast Track Initiative, UNICEF and UNESCO, discuss strategies to ensure that their work includes children with disabilities.
- Where sound policies for inclusion exist, support efforts to mobilise funding and promote implementation.
- Support inter-sectoral collaboration, working across education, health and social protection.



Alieu (aged 11, pictured in the foreground) is blind and attends Bakoteh Lower Basic School in The Gambia. His friend Lamin Saidu helps him get to school every day.

Jenny Matthews/Sightsavers

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