

Economic empowerment of youth with disabilities: behaviour change learning from Sightsavers in Uganda

Background

Between 2016 and 2020, Sightsavers' Uganda country office delivered two projects on the economic empowerment, livelihoods and social inclusion of youth with disabilities. These projects were funded by the European Commission (EC) and the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF). <https://www.sightsavers.org/programmes/connecting-the-dots/>

Within these projects, Sightsavers' Uganda country office used a participatory process to develop a Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) strategy focused on influencing socio-cultural norms and reducing stigma and discrimination faced by youth with disabilities. The focus of change was:

- Youth with disabilities as equal economic actors, including willingness by consumers to buy their products.
- Youth with disabilities as valued and integrated members of both the community and formal and informal business sectors.

Activities were delivered through a series of sessions designed to create a positive change in awareness, attitudes, acceptance and behaviours towards youth with disabilities within families, employers in the private sector and the wider community. These sessions were delivered between 2018 and 2020.

The learning workshop

Sightsavers' Uganda country office gathered retrospective knowledge by running a learning workshop in Masindi in October 2020. This workshop gave an opportunity for project stakeholders to appraise the content of the behaviour change sessions, gather testimonies from those involved and explore perceived changes in **awareness, attitudes, acceptance and behaviours** towards youth with disabilities.

Workshop activities

A **Knowledge Café**: a relaxed, interactive space for participants to discuss the different behaviour change sessions: how they were conducted, what the opportunities and challenges were and what could have been done differently.

A **Retrospect Buzz Group** exercise to bring together diverse stakeholders and openly discuss how the behaviour change sessions contributed to change.

A **Peer Assist** exercise (conducted in pairs) to discuss ideas for impactful ways to share the behaviour change approach and methods with others, both within and beyond their communities.

A **wrap-up questionnaire** to gather information on awareness, attitudes, acceptance and recognition of youth with disabilities both in the workplace and in their communities.

Learning workshop participants were a diverse mix of youth with disabilities, their parents and family members; small business owners and employers; district community development officers and councillors for disability; parent network leaders and participants; youth and Organisations of Persons with Disabilities leaders (OPDs), and participants and bank representatives. Sightsavers' Uganda country office acted as facilitators.

Behaviour change sessions – what have we learned?

Full details on the session plans can be found on the Sightsavers portal [here](#).

Careers fairs

Careers fairs are a community celebration event intended to create awareness and to change the attitudes of employers, families, local leaders, government and the wider community about the professional skills and capabilities of youth with disabilities. Activities can include music, dance, the display and auctioning of products, tools and skills, testimonies by youth with disabilities and their employers, motivational speeches by leaders and team-building activities.



A local artist entertains guests with one of the project participants at a careers fair in Masindi, Uganda. Photo © Sightsavers / Ambrose Watanda



Ingredients for a successful session

- Carefully plan your communication channels to mobilise a diverse range of attendees.
- Plan several activities that enable the full participation of event participants.
- Involve local leaders and entertainment to encourage people to attend the event.

- Ensure the event is inclusive and accessible, for example carefully consider the location for access, and provide sign language interpreters and personal assistants.
- Showcase a diverse range of skills, abilities and backgrounds.
- Encourage testimonies by project participants through peer-to-peer exchanges. This involves successful project participants sharing their testimonies.



Learning

- Careers fairs can have a positive impact on the lives of youth with disabilities.
- Beyond the immediate economic benefit, the experience of selling their products and interacting with clients in this structured context is a booster for self-esteem.
- The fair is an opportunity for youth with disabilities to learn from and encourage each other, creating a sense of community that can be further cultivated.
- Fairs are a way to increase support from both parents and the community.
- Mobilising people for a careers fair can be difficult and demanding, but with the right approach it is worth the effort.

Market activation

Market activation sessions (held at markets or trading centres) are a space where youth with disabilities can increase awareness and demand for their products and/or skills while increasing their confidence in selling. They provide an opportunity to challenge community perceptions on the range and quality of the youth's products and services, and to challenge disability stereotypes and discrimination as a whole.



A market activation session in Kijura-Masindi, where a diverse group of youth with disabilities are selling their products.



Ingredients for a successful session

- Mobilise youth with disabilities to prepare their products and bring them to the market on market day.
- Plan logistics: book and pay for space at the market; organise transport and lunch for youth; provide a megaphone for advertising and messaging.
- Carefully select the skills and products to be displayed. Find the best location in the market for them. Allow every youth a chance to call out to customers to buy their products.
- Involve local market authorities early in the process to receive their endorsement and support on the day of the session - and in the long term.
- Efficiently market the products to the community to dispel negative perceptions such as doubts on quality.



Learning

- Market activation sessions are an impactful approach to showcasing the skills, products and capabilities of youth with disabilities.
- Through learning by doing, participants can test and increase their skills in marketing and negotiation through direct contact with community members and sellers.
- The sessions provide visibility to youth's businesses, and this exposure can bring additional benefits, for example opportunities for financing their activities.

Family exchange visit

Led by members of parent networks, these sessions help to identify and address challenges experienced by the family of a youth with a disability. The youth may have received project training but now lacks the support from parents, financing and peer or community members to enter into employment or set up a business.



A parent of one of the project participants explains strategies for diversifying the income-generating activities of the project participants to other parents in Hoima, Uganda.



Ingredients for successful implementation:

- The inclusion of parent training in this intervention increases commitment and support to youth with disabilities. It also addresses potential safeguarding issues.
- Multiple visits are needed to support change and monitor its impact.
- Involving local authorities in the intervention, potentially through radio mass education or other mass media, can lend it more legitimacy.
- Expectations of what the visits entail and the level of support that parents will receive may vary, so it is important to make sure that the scope of the activity is clear to everyone.



Learning

- These sessions are seen as very impactful in finding solutions to household and family problems, which are key to allowing youth with disabilities to succeed at their place of work.
- However, the long-term effect of such activity will need further evaluation.
- Youth and Organisations of People with Disabilities (OPDs) can play a role in reinforcing and monitoring the impact of this activity in the longer term.

Private sector breakfast meetings

These sessions are held in a more formal setting, often over breakfast. Local employers and financial institutions can hear about the skills and abilities of youth with disabilities, and hear testimonies of youth, employers and customers with disabilities. They aim to increase awareness and improve attitudes on the importance of including people with disabilities in financial services and economic opportunities. The meeting often ends with a commitment by attendees.



One output of the breakfast meetings is a signed commitment board, which is hung in the employers' offices after the meeting.



Ingredients for successful implementation

- Invite a diverse range of participants well in advance, diversify the potential employer pool and include smaller businesses.
- Organise several smaller meetings rather than a single large one. Plan logistics such as the venue/hotel and food/refreshments.
- Think through the agenda: introduce participants to the project and the purpose of the meeting; have two youth with disabilities (one who is successfully employed or who has accessed financial services; and another who has been unsuccessful) to share their different experiences and testimonies. Invite an employer or financial institution to testify or give their experiences of employing youth with disabilities or assisting those who have accessed financial services.
- Organise a commitment board with a statement (see above photo) and ask companies to commit by signing the board and developing an action plan.



Learning

- High-level breakfast meetings can help to increase awareness of the youth with disabilities' needs for inclusion in economic opportunities.
- With increased awareness, companies are willing to commit to hire youth with disabilities and consider them for business financing opportunities.
- To maximise this impact, it is important to carefully select a diverse sample of employers in relevant sectors.

Learning visits by potential employers

Potential employers and business owners are supported to visit Vocational Training Institutions (VTIs) to learn about the certified training and skills of youth with disabilities in different occupations. This is to increase awareness of their skills, to allow space for the discussion of internships or job opportunities and to influence the attitudes of employers towards youth with disabilities.



Monica Friday is pictured in her classroom on the first day of her plumbing course at the vocational training institute in Hoima, Uganda.



Ingredients for successful implementation:

- Clearly define expectations for the visit.
- Timing: host the visit when project participants have been placed in training for at least one or two months. Allow time during the visit for sufficient individual interactions between the visitors and youth with disabilities.

- Preparation is key: work with the VTI to prepare to receive the learning team. On the day, host a briefing about the project and objectives of the visit and activities. Allow space for questions, comments and concerns from the employers.
- Think through who is involved: identify which potential employers or business managers share the occupations of the project participants for internment placement after training and include them on the list of participants.
- Use visual displays: allow potential employers to see the products made by the project participants. Clearly display their quality and government certification standards.



Learning

- Learning visits by employers are a good way to raise awareness about the level of training and quality of the work of youth with disabilities.
- It is a great way for training institutions to showcase their work and promote the skills of their students.

Impact of BCC work

Youth as equal economic actors in the community

Before the project

According to participants, before the project, **awareness about disability was generally low** in the Bunyoro and Acholi sub-regions. **Misconceptions about disability were widespread**, including the belief that disability was communicable from person to person, that having a disability meant one was cursed and that it represented a bad omen for the family and the community, and that people with disabilities were generally weak and unable to perform productive tasks, including producing quality products, or to be educated.

As a result, **negative attitudes, neglect, stigmatisation and lack of support** seemed justified and acceptable, resulting in youth reporting **low levels of self-esteem and confidence**. This applied to both women and men, but women were particularly vulnerable to exploitation, and exclusion from education and formal training, and ended up living with high levels of poverty.

This created **a complex underlying context for the employment of youth with disabilities**, who would have to overcome these barriers to receive offers of employment from business owners whose views often aligned with those of the community.

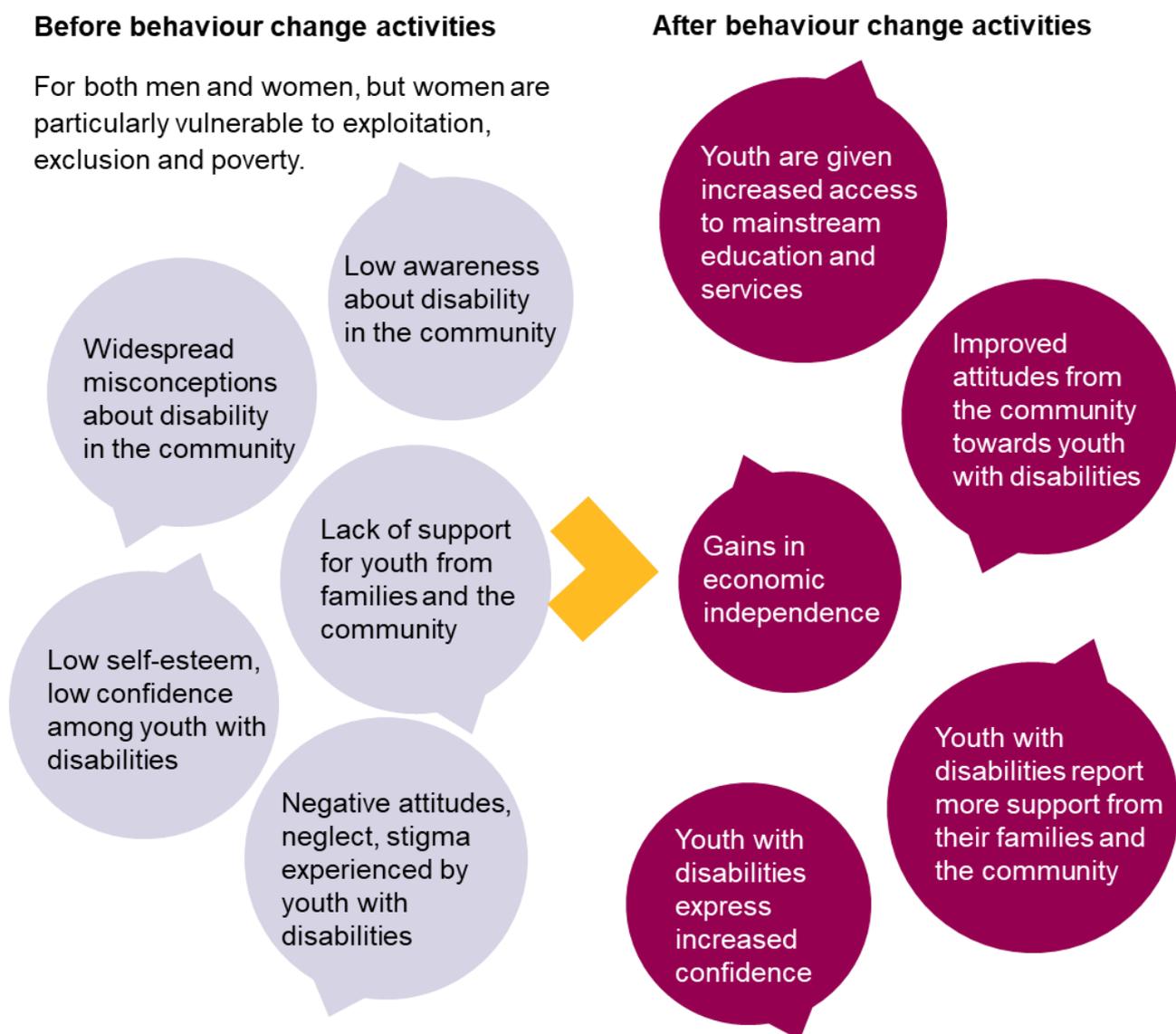
Change that they saw

Youth with disabilities who were exposed to the project have **gained confidence**, to the point that some now use newly-acquired public speaking skills to advocate for people with disabilities, and to also participate in local politics. After receiving training in a variety of

skills, they have been able to produce and sell quality products, thus **gaining economic independence**. That is the case for both men and women, who are now both acquiring similar skills previously considered as reserved for men only.

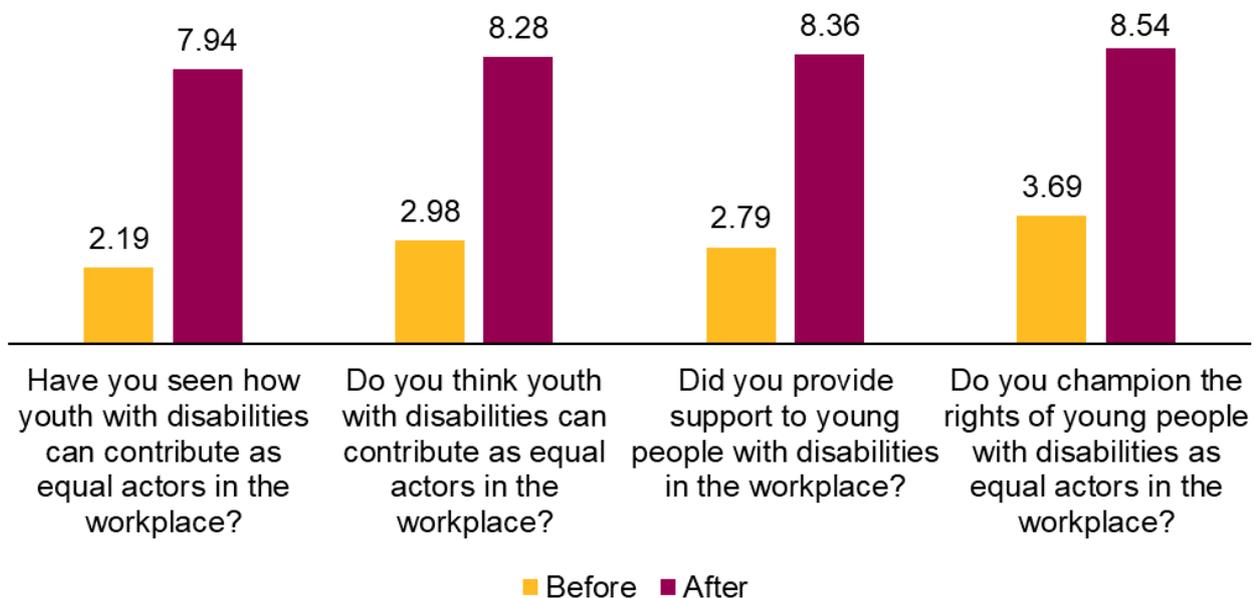
Attitudes towards youth with disabilities have changed as well. They are receiving **more support** from their families and communities. More youth with disabilities are also getting married, and are **accessing mainstream schools** at a seemingly higher rate. They are also accessing mainstream savings groups.

Figure 1: Themes that appeared in discussions before and after the behaviour change activities were completed.



The graph below shows how project participants who attended the learning workshop and filled out the questionnaire (N=44, 48 per cent women) believed that their own awareness, attitudes, acceptance and behaviours towards youth with disabilities as equal economic actors had strongly improved after participating in the behaviour change sessions.

Graph 1: Average score of respondents from 1 to 10 (1 reflecting the lowest and 10 the strongest agreement with the statement), before and after the BCC activities.



Unexpected consequences

- Success was a double-edged sword for some of the youth involved in the project:
 - It generated some negative behaviour as a result of jealousy in the community.
 - Assets gained through the project (such as tools and products) put them at risk of theft, including by their own family members.
 - Their newfound relative independence meant that some families abandoned their parental duties and support.
 - They experienced a new and excessive burden of responsibilities within their families.
- Success also drove some youth to behave in ways that misaligned with community expectations and values, such as bad manners or drinking alcohol.

Youth as valued members of the community

Before the project

Youth with disabilities were generally viewed as **unproductive and valueless members of the community** who did not deserve access to ownership of land or any type of property. Attitudes towards them were driven by the **belief that disability is a curse** on the family or

community, resulting in **social isolation and alienation**. This applied to both women and men, although to some extent women were even more disadvantaged.

Change that they saw

Increased awareness about disability and disability rights has led to positive changes. Youth with disabilities are **no longer excluded from property ownership**. Affirmative action, in the form of inclusion requirements to receive government youth funding, has allowed for them to **gain and hold leadership positions in the community**. Their newly acquired skills have allowed them to **rise and compete in the employment sector**, which has given them much **independence** that is also seen in their private lives: for example, more women with disabilities are now getting married and thriving in their households.

Figure 2: Themes that appear in discussions of before and after the BCC activities were done.

Before behaviour change activities

For both men and women, but women were even more disadvantaged.

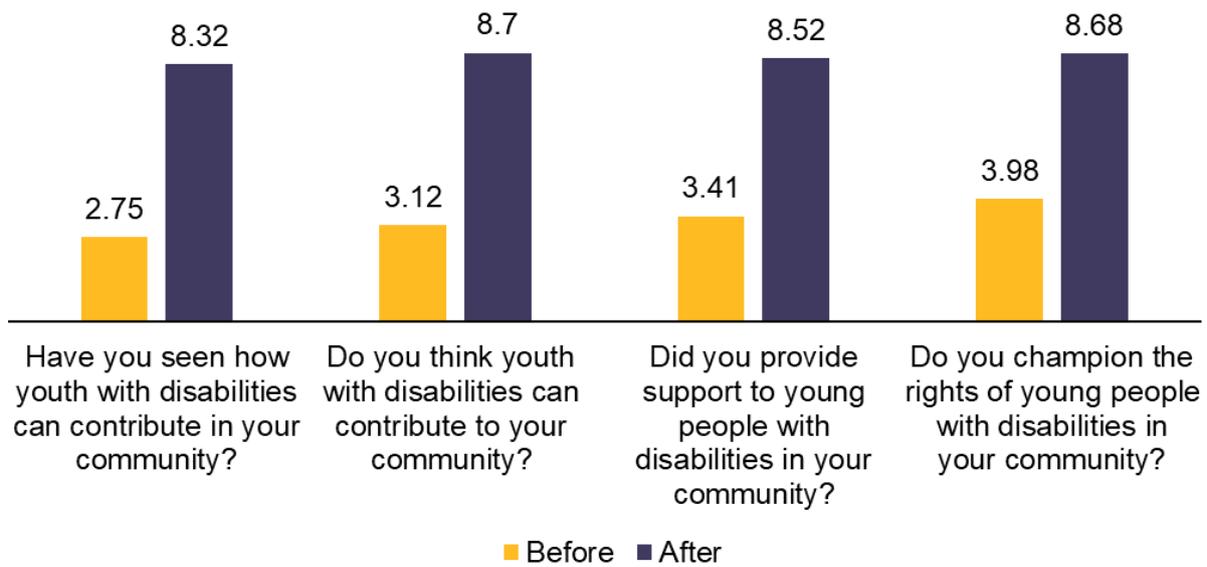


After behaviour change activities



The graph below shows how project participants at the learning workshop (as above) believed that their own awareness, attitudes, acceptance and behaviours towards youth with disabilities as valued members of the community had strongly improved through participation in the behaviour change sessions.

Graph 2: Average score of respondents from 1 to 10 (1 reflecting the lowest and 10 the strongest agreement with the statement), before and after the BCC activities



Unexpected consequences

- Youth’s success in their businesses and their rise in the community can give rise to jealousy and a shifting view of disability as being ‘fancy’ because it is the focus of the projects and assistance.
- In some instances, they have become the driving source of income in their families, in spite of low levels of income, which limits their growth and development.

The future

Project participants saw a positive future for the integration of youth with disabilities as valued and integrated members of their communities and as equal economic actors.

They also saw a range of opportunities to share learning from this project with a range of stakeholders:

Opportunities to share the behaviour change session learning and scale up the activities:

Radio talk shows can reach community development officers, district unions, youth and OPDs, parent networks and counsellors.

Community dialogue meetings are a good forum to reach parents and peer parent networks, counsellors for people with disabilities and leaders of OPDs.

Family visits are ways to increase awareness among parents and youth, people with



Project participants looking happy and waving at the camera.

Acknowledgements

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