

Policy brief: Promoting inclusive education for girls and boys with disabilities in West and Central Africa

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Introduction

Girls and boys with disabilities in West and Central Africa have the same rights to quality inclusive education as all children. This should enable them to participate actively and meaningfully in learning and society. However, at present, these children are largely excluded from education and learning. Those children with disabilities who do attend school face large ‘disability gaps’ in learning outcomes and attainment due to systemic inequalities, poor quality teaching and governance.ⁱ

The current global COVID-19 pandemic is compounding inequalities, exclusion and marginalisation as children with disabilities face major hurdles to home learning and to returning to schools as they reopen. Changes to infrastructure as a result of the pandemic, curriculum modifications to accommodate catch-up programmes and the enrolment of incoming Grade 1 students all put education systems under intense pressure - with negative consequences for equity.

Changes to education systems are urgently needed to prevent children with disabilities falling through these gaps and to empower and support them to reach their full potential – for themselves and society – throughout their lives. Inclusive education offers a tremendous opportunity to lay the foundations for inclusive societies to which all citizens can contribute.

Education is a human right. This right is universal and indivisible, and enshrined in a number of international conventions and instruments including the **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** (UNCRPD) and the **Abidjan Principles**. Countries signing and ratifying the UNCRPD commit to following the principles and ideals of the Convention and to taking legislative, administrative and adjudicative measures to implement provisions enshrined in the Convention. **Goal 4** of the **Sustainable Development Goal** (SDG) agenda also contains a clear message to ‘leave no one behind’ in the provision of inclusive, equitable and good-quality education. This promise to end exclusion was also reiterated as a core commitment at the **World Humanitarian Summit** in 2016.

As can be seen in Figure 1, all countries in West and Central Africa (WCA), with the exception of Equatorial Guinea, have committed to ending the exclusion of children with disabilities from education by signing and/or ratifying the UNCRPD.

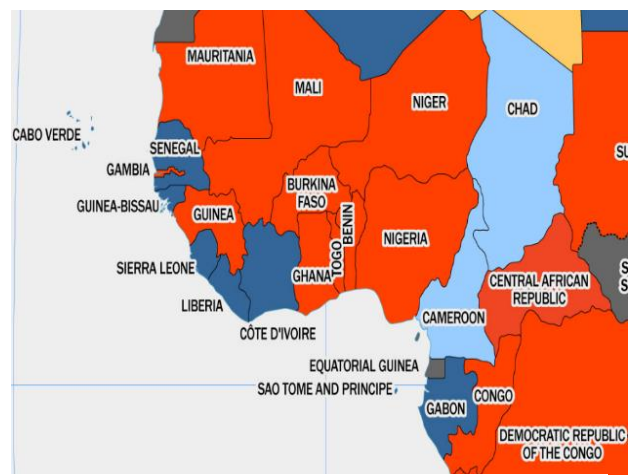


Figure 1: WCA State signatories to the UNCRPD. Light blue: signatories to optional protocol; dark blue: ratifications /accessions to the Convention; red: signatories to the Convention and optional protocol. Source: <https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/maps/enablemap.jpg>

Countries in WCA have also signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Right of the Child. The African Union (AU) has developed a Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of People with Disabilities in Africa.ⁱⁱ This proposes an action plan for people with disabilities that recognises the need for inclusion and empowerment.ⁱⁱⁱ

However, there is a discrepancy between discourse and concrete commitment in many WCA countries. Most governments have yet to effectively implement the conventions and laws they have ratified on the rights of people with disabilities.^{iv}

Systemic inequalities are the root cause of the exclusion of learners with disabilities from schooling. An estimated 93-150 million children live with disabilities globally.^v Lack of accurate country-level data on disability prevalence means that data is unreliable and inaccurate, which can make analysis and understanding of the scale of the challenge in some countries problematic. However, one reputable recent study found that best estimates indicate that in low and lower-middle income countries, approximately 40 per cent of children with disabilities are out of school at primary level, and 55 per cent at lower secondary level.^{vi} Another study of 15 low and middle income countries found that disability reduces the probability of school attendance by a median 30.9 percentage points.^{vii}

A Global Partnership for Education report in 2018 showed that in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia “fewer than five per cent of children with disabilities are enrolled in primary school”. The report also showed that exclusion continues even when children are enrolled because curricula and teaching practices are not adapted to meet learning needs.^{viii} A study by Mizunoya et al found that 69.1 per cent of children out of school in Nigeria had disabilities.^{ix} The same study concluded that poverty is not the only factor keeping these children out of school.

Schools reproduce power structures and hierarchies,^x and reinforce disability-related stereotypes. Intersecting form of discrimination compound the exclusion of children with disabilities: gender, language, age, location and living in a fragile or crisis affected country are all major barriers to accessing meaningful participation and achievement in schooling.

Exclusion from the education system also bears significant consequences at individual and national level^{xi}. Countries lose three to seven per cent of their GDP^{xii} due to the exclusion of people with disabilities from the labour market, some of which can be attributed to lack of education.



Aicha, a girl with albinism, thrives with her friends in an inclusive school playground. Source: Handicap International, Marta Moreiras, Bissau (Guinea Bissau), 2017.

Barriers to inclusive education for children with disabilities in West and Central Africa

Understanding the different barriers to inclusive education and how they are experienced by girls and boys with disabilities is critical to developing an effective response. Among the key obstacles to educating children with disabilities in WCA are inadequate inclusive education policies, plans and budgets, inappropriate teaching methods and teaching materials, negative attitudes of education professionals and communities, lack of accessible infrastructure and equipment, as well as household poverty.

Political and institutional policy and financing

A lack of political will to implement national legislative and policy frameworks for inclusion are a major barrier to inclusive education. In WCA, very few countries have an inclusive education policy (the exceptions being Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Rwanda and Sierra Leone).

Shortcomings in political will and policy environment mean that the requisite institutional architecture is not in place to make the reforms needed for education systems to become more inclusive. Gaps in the policy environment include a lack of mainstreaming of inclusion

across ministries of education, the lack of inclusion focal points centrally and locally, gaps in financial and technical capacity. Reforms are needed to the governance of institutions to ensure educational inclusion is achieved and sustained.

Case study: disability inclusion in strategy, budgets and indicators in Senegal's Education Sector Plan

Since 2016, Humanity & Inclusion (HI) and Sightsavers have been providing technical and financial assistance to Senegal's Ministry of Education to support the development of strategic directions for inclusive education, using good practices collected in pilot schools in four regions. In collaboration with the Italian Agency for Cooperation and Development, UNICEF, the two NGOs support a coordination mechanism for national-level inclusive education activities, through the coordination of a technical committee and focal points within the ministry.

In 2017, Sightsavers carried out an analysis of the costs of including disability in education to support the development of the Education Sector Plan budget (PAQUET). Since 2018, as part of the PAQUET review, HI and Sightsavers have facilitated workshops to support the inclusion of disability-related performance indicators in the Results Measurement Framework (RMF), such as the percentage of teachers trained in inclusive education, the percentage of new accessible buildings and the percentage of schools with suitable teaching materials. These indicators reflect the commitments of target 4.5 of SDG 4.

States have an 'unequivocal obligation' to ensure that education is 'free' and must take steps to remove financial barriers for all children^{xiii} and ensure a real commitment to making not only primary education free but also universalising secondary education.^{xiv} However, governments in WCA often identify financing as a key barrier to implementing inclusive education,^{xv} while 70% of children drop out of school in the region due to financial difficulties.^{xvi}

Data

A lack of comparable data on disability is a global issue and a major barrier to the achievement of more inclusive approaches to education. Governments which do not understand the scale of the challenge they are facing in terms of, for example, primary school access and completion, secondary school transition and completion etc. for learners with disabilities are unable to make the case for action.

Few Education Management Information Systems (EMIS)^{xvii} in WCA take disability into account: only 12 countries out of 24 (Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo)^{xviii} collect data, but it is rarely disaggregated by gender, age, type and severity of impairment. There is no harmonised definition of disability in the region, and available data often only relates to physical and sensory impairments.^{xix}

SDG 4 articulates the need for a significant acceleration in data usage to improve the access and equity components of education systems^{xx}. Some governments, such as Togo, are making progress in this area (see case study below). However, most WCA countries do not have robust EMIS, staff resources and skills, or analytical capacities to support policy-making.^{xxi} In general, there is a lack of in-depth analysis, clear approaches and even tangible political will regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities in education sector annual

reviews, plans and budgets in WCA. Poor coordination between directorates within the ministry of education and between ministries is a key barrier to the transformation of the education system for inclusive education.

Case study: including disability in Togo's EMIS

In Togo, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (Ministère des Enseignements Primaire et Secondaire or MEPS) - with the support of UNICEF, HI and the French Development Agency - has been implementing pilot EMIS initiatives in the Kara and Savannah regions since 2011.

The success of these initiatives should inform the development and implementation of a national inclusive education strategy. To ensure the availability of essential data for the development of a disability-aware strategy, the MEPS consulted all of its partners and reviewed the EMIS collection tools in 2018. This also enabled data collection on water and sanitation, school feeding programmes, gender-based violence and health in schools. The country started to publish data for preschool, primary and two secondary cycles in the 2018-2019 school year, including the number of students by disability and other conditions (visual impairment, blindness, mild physical disability, severe physical disability, hearing impairment, deafness, cognitive impairment and albinism) with disaggregation by gender, type of school, level/class and region.

Social exclusion: stigma and discrimination

"I am no longer in school because other children make fun of me and say that I am half a person. Yes, even so far, I really want to go to school, but my friends say that I am incomplete. It is because of this that my father made me leave school..."^{xxii}

Stigma and discrimination are key obstacles to the inclusion of children with disabilities in WCA schools. This is often due to a lack of knowledge or understanding of disability among parents, teachers and the wider community. Customs, myths and beliefs hinder educational opportunities for children with disabilities, who are often invisible in their communities because their parents hide them or keep them at home to protect them (see box above).

As a result, children with disabilities are often under-stimulated due to a lack of interaction with others, and consequently develop few essential social skills. Many parents of non-disabled children fear that having a disabled child in the classroom will slow down their own children's academic progress, or even lead to physical, mental or 'spiritual' contagion.

Access to education

Access to education for learners with disabilities is hindered by myriad factors, including a lack of 'universal design' in education systems. Universal design refers to the design of buildings, products or environments to make them accessible to all people, regardless of age, disability or other factors. According to the UNCRPD committee, universal design also extends beyond facilities and services to the provision of assistive devices, software and teaching and learning approaches and materials that facilitate the full presence, participation and achievement of all learners.^{xxiii}



Access measures allow Ariane Marie to learn independently in an inclusive classroom. Source: Sightsavers, Bamako, Mali (2018).

“I’ve had my glasses for two years. Before having them, I didn’t see well in class. I wrote very badly in my schoolbook. I skipped lines when I wrote. I struggled a lot with my learning. Now I can write properly, I see everything that is written in class. I learn my lessons regularly, without other people’s help. The thing I like most about school is playing with my classmates. When I grow up, I want to be a teacher to help all children who wear glasses.” – Ariane Marie. Bamako, Mali

Facilities and infrastructure

The environmental barriers faced by learners with disabilities include inadequate school infrastructure and transportation. The poor condition of roads in the region, long distances to school and lack of accessible transport options exclude children with disabilities from schooling simply because they cannot reach centres of learning. The problem is compounded by inaccessible school infrastructure^{xxiv} such as lack of ramps to access classrooms, rough and uneven ground in recreational areas, non-existent lifts in multi-level buildings, lack of accessible technologies, inaccessible or insecure water and sanitation points, and poor lighting and soundproofing of classrooms. Unsafe, non-segregated water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and menstrual hygiene management facilities can be a particular barrier for adolescent girls with disabilities who are regularly forced to stay home as a result, eventually resulting in dropping out permanently. Despite a global push to ensure that schools are 'designed for all,'^{xxv} few schools in WCA adhere to universal design standards.

A lack of assistive devices for children with visual, hearing, mobility and cognitive impairments can be a major barrier to accessing education in WCA.^{xxvi} This can be as simple as the unavailability of spectacles (see photo 2). The additional cost of medical consultations, assistive devices and associated maintenance, and specialised learning materials, are reasons given by parents to explain why their children with disabilities are not in education^{xxvii}, particularly girls. Girls with disabilities have more restricted access than boys to assistive devices.^{xxviii} Many children also rely on school meals for food. The closure of schools has disrupted all these protective mechanisms and services, further exposing girls to the risk of violence and exclusion.^{xxix} Lack of coordination between ministries of education, health and social affairs compounds the problem. Cross-sectoral collaboration is vital in order to ensure that all children grow up educated, healthy and safe.

Protection and gender-based violence

“Generally, a disabled girl is married off to the great marabouts, like a kind of almsgiving, without the need for a dowry or wedding trousseau.”^{xxx} – Focus group discussion in Maradi, Niger.

Both girls and boys with disabilities can be particularly at risk from gender-based violence (GBV) both in schools and en route to school, preventing school attendance, learning and retention.^{xxxi} It can also impact on lower self-esteem and anxiety.^{xxxii} Girls with disabilities experience higher rates of GBV^{xxxiii} and may face communication and cultural barriers to reporting incidents and accessing referral services, if they exist. A lack of training and accountability of teachers and other education staff on key prevention and protection measures such as codes of conduct are additional barriers. Families and caregivers often resist sending their daughters with disabilities to school for fear of their safety and the lack of protection from violence and sexual abuse.^{xxxiv}

Education governance and leadership

A lack of leadership training for school head teachers and other key education personnel, such as the inspectorate, means that school governance and leadership on inclusive education is often poor in WCA. Deficits in inclusive education planning, management (including the support and supervision of classroom teachers), monitoring and evaluation, and community awareness generation are a barrier to good-quality inclusive education.

Quality – learning and teaching, completion, transition

Instruction and learning processes should be inclusive, responsive, participatory and individual. Curricula should be adapted and Individual Education Plans designed, which identify reasonable accommodations and specific supports (such as assistive technologies and one-to-one teaching support) to facilitate access to education for learners with disabilities. Inclusive education offers a tremendous opportunity to improve learning content and teaching practices for all in countries where performance and secondary school transition indicators remain very low.^{xxxv}

An education system committed to inclusive education relies on qualified, motivated teachers and tailored teaching and learning methods (e.g. itinerant teaching – see photo 4) to provide better-quality teaching.^{xxxvi} It also involves all school stakeholders (directors, assistants,

itinerant and specialist teachers) and the community in which the children live, starting with parents.

However, the complex reality of life in WCA schools means that children with disabilities are not getting the support they need. Even where children with disabilities are enrolled in school, they are doing less well than their peers without disabilities. A study by Wodon (2018) using data from Programme for the Analysis of Education Systems (PASEC) implemented assessments found that children with self-reported hearing or seeing difficulties did worse on standardised reading and mathematics tests in all but one of ten countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.^{xxxvii}



A teacher in a mainstream class gives sign language explanations to a young deaf student. Source: Handicap International, W. Saré, (Togo), 2014.

The experience of implementing agencies in WCA shows that inclusion and disability are rarely addressed in initial and in-service teacher training programmes, and that teachers receive little support on special educational needs. PASEC data from Sub-Saharan Africa indicates that less than one in ten teachers benefit from in-service training which aims to promote inclusive education. Within a dozen categories of in-service training, this is the category with the lowest coverage rate among teachers across countries.^{xxxviii}

A lack of technical expertise within ministries of education developing the school curriculum leads to particularly rigid approaches which do not reflect the needs, potential and interests of children with special educational needs. There is often a lack of proficiency in classroom management, group dynamics, diversity, peer learning, multisensory teaching or the development of appropriate tools.

Non-gender and disability-sensitive teaching methods and teaching materials pose various obstacles to learning. Children with disabilities tend to be neglected and are less likely to receive adequate educational support than their peers without disabilities.^{xxxix} Teachers tend to have lower expectations of girls with disabilities, especially in science and mathematics, which leads to a gender bias in educational and vocational pathways. Girls' leadership and potential is not valued, and girls with disabilities come last in resource allocation.^{xl}

Case study: the introduction of inclusive education in initial teacher training in Burkina Faso

In Burkina Faso, Humanity & Inclusion (HI) have been supporting the introduction of inclusive education in initial teacher training since 2013. The subject was introduced into training programmes for eight national public and private teacher-training centres (Écoles Nationales de Formation des Enseignants - ENEP), the national training centre for secondary school teachers (École Nationale de Formation des Enseignants du Secondaire) and for education supervisors following advocacy, consultation and technical support with the Ministry of Education (MoE). After many years of experimentation, the guiding principles of inclusive education are now part of the teacher-training curriculum via a cross-cutting approach. This means that trainers from at least ten teaching units (such as mathematics, French, and civic and moral education) identify strategies that allow for the integration of inclusive education into their respective disciplines. A national pool of 20 trainers within the MoE's directorate for the promotion of inclusive education, girls' education and gender equality is in place. It is committed to ensuring that each student teacher has theoretical and practical skills in inclusive education. There are around 3,000 trainees per year. This work is part of initial teacher-training reforms and meets the government's ambitions as set out in the ESP 2017-2030.

Sightsavers supports similar initiatives in Sierra Leone and Cameroon. Ministries of education requested technical assistance for the introduction of a compulsory 'inclusive education' module in the initial teacher-training curriculum. Once these modules have been produced, the inclusive education components will supplement existing disciplines.

Conflict and crises

Learners with disabilities are routinely the most marginalised and excluded group from education systems, including in emergencies. Humanitarian crises can increase the numbers of children and young people with disabilities, particularly during disease outbreaks, natural disasters and violent conflicts, adding to the pressure on already fragile education systems. However, inclusive, equitable education in emergencies can enhance the quality of learning opportunities for all, improving outcomes and catalysing innovation, helping governments to 'build back better' and normalise or embed inclusion in systems emerging from crises.^{xli}



A girl child refugee with a disability participates in an inclusive classroom. Source: UNHCR, Gabriel Tekumafor, Douala, Cameroon, 2019.

Girls and boys with disabilities are often forgotten by humanitarian aid and face greater marginalisation in a context of dwindling resources.^{xlii} They often do not receive any form of education or psychosocial support and remain inadequately included in emergency programmes^{xliii}. School attacks or takeovers can even reverse progress on inclusion, pushing previously included children with disabilities into domestic isolation or exploitative activities, such as street work and begging.^{xliv}

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated structural inequalities across WCA and worsened gender inequality and exclusion. School closures pose a monumental challenge for equity and inclusion in education – in addition to compounding prevailing inequalities, they also exacerbate discriminatory patterns that push children out of education.

National responses and contingency plans often fail to address the differential impact of crises on children with disabilities. Few specific measures are put in place to ensure that the needs of learners with disabilities are met and that continuity of education is maintained. Some efforts, however, have been made to provide support to people with disabilities as part of the COVID-19 response. For example, more than 80 per cent of US\$160.5 million grants from GPE to support mitigating the effects of COVID-19 on education includes support to disability inclusion in remote learning content during school closures.^{xlv}

Where the education sector was providing access to health services for girls and children with disabilities, these have been interrupted and protection structures have not been modified to mitigate disruption. Learners with disabilities, particularly girls, are in danger of not returning to school, increasing the number out-of-school girls in the region.^{xlvi} As some governments accelerated the adoption of technology and multimedia platforms for learning, this has potential to widen participation to reach children that have traditionally been at the margins of education systems such as refugees, children with special learning needs or disabilities, children from the poorest households and those living in remote communities.^{xlvi} However, more evidence is needed on the efficacy of these remote learning approaches if they are to be effectively implemented.

The COVID-19 pandemic reminds us of the urgency of WCA education systems to prepare to be more resilient to crises in ways that are inclusive, and to stimulate the humanitarian-development collaboration that can support the continuity of inclusive education and ensure that education services are delivered in protracted crisis and early recovery situations.

Opportunities

Although efforts to make education inclusive for children with disabilities in WCA face some major challenges, there are currently a number of opportunities.

Enhanced political will reflected in policy and data collection

As noted above, the African Union's action plan for the inclusion and empowerment of people with disabilities under the Protocol to the African Charter signals a new era of political support. The availability of limited special-education provision is also pushing countries to invest in inclusive education as part of wider education system strengthening.^{xlvi} Three States (Burkina Faso, Ghana and Sierra Leone) have developed an Education Sector Plan which integrates inclusive education and aspects linked to gender and disability. Five countries are in the process of drafting their inclusive education policy (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Senegal and Togo).^{xlvii} Where data is available in some countries it highlights certain trends, such as an increase in enrolment rates of children with disabilities (five States: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ghana, The Gambia and Togo). At least eight countries have started to collect data on disability in their EMIS (Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Senegal).ⁱ Initiatives to use the Washington Group Short Set Questions (WGQ/SSQ)^{li} are underway.

Growing regional expertise in inclusive education

Growing regional expertise in inclusive education provides opportunities for change. Partners such as the West African Federation of Disabled Persons Organisations (FOAPH), along with national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), have acquired solid expertise in gender, disability, equity and inclusive education. Concerted advocacy efforts have had a positive influence on the adoption, ratification and ownership of inclusive education conventions, policies and programmes in WCA, a critical first step on the journey towards more and better inclusion.

Thanks to research, pilot projects and knowledge sharing (such as capitalisation, cost of equity studies and seminars) by disability and gender-focused NGOs (Sightsavers, HI, Plan International, ANCEFA, FAWE), and with the support of United Nations agencies (UNESCO, UNICEF, UNHCR) and their newly defined Strategic Framework on Disability, regional expertise is being built up. A GPE Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX) grant implemented by UNICEF has also supported the capacity of government officials to use and analyse education data about groups that are disadvantaged due to disability and location in The Gambia, Benin and Togo.^{lii} This technical assistance is crucial to ensure the implementation of quality inclusive education at national level.^{liii}

Supporting the development of a national inclusive education policy in Sierra Leone

In 2016, Sightsavers, HI and Plan International supported the Ministry of Education (MEST) in Sierra Leone to write its national inclusive education policy, with funding from the World Bank. Key stakeholders led the drafting process, and Sightsavers and a MEST focal point were designated to act as coordinators. Joint advocacy was carried out to secure international funding and a consultant from the University of Northampton (UK) carried out a situation analysis, validated by all stakeholders. Multi-stakeholder regional consultation took place (parents, communities, traditional leaders, Ministry of Health and Social Action officials, special and inclusive schools and the NCPD), followed by the production of a policy document and associated action plan, which was officially validated by the MEST in 2018. Ratification of this policy is underway in parliament.

Similar initiatives are currently supported by Sightsavers in Cameroon, and by a group of agencies (HI, Sightsavers, UNICEF and AICS) in Senegal.

A new international priority

Further to the Salamanca Declaration^{liv} which was widely adopted in WCA, the African Union's Agenda 2063^{lv} and the global Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development,^{lvi} inclusion and equity are now regarded as the foundations of quality education.

In light of the considerable annual external financing deficit of \$39 billion^{lvii} to provide quality pre-school, primary and secondary education to all children by 2030,^{lviii} key donors are showing renewed interest in funding inclusive education - with a focus on gender and disability. Several donors promote the funding of inclusive education in national Education Sector Plans (ESPs) and programmes.^{lix} However, donor advocacy for the inclusion of disability in ESPs needs to be met with action by partner governments. The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) encourages country partners to develop strong ESPs with strategies for the inclusion of marginalised children. Results-based funding (70 per cent) is granted based on a credible ESP approved by technical and financial partners, including civil society^{lx}. The remaining 30 per cent is granted in line with equity, efficiency and learning outcomes criteria, particularly regarding children with disabilities.^{lxi} Such an approach is needed in all countries, not only those which are GPE partners.

Itinerant teachers/inclusive education champions in WCA

In 2010, HI and the Ministry of Education in Togo used the 'itinerant teacher' approach to facilitate inclusive education for children with cognitive, hearing or visual impairments. Each teacher is responsible for supporting the learning of around 25 children in different mainstream schools in a district. Itinerant teachers are trained in appropriate teaching techniques for children with disabilities (such as sign language, Braille) and in also supporting the teacher in class. Togo's Regional Education Directorate manages this programme in five school districts, leading to institutional ownership. This strategy has generated some very satisfactory results: targeted children have enjoyed better academic results than their counterparts, and education authorities ensure follow-up and supervision in the field. Other actors (Education for All National Coalition, Plan International) are also involved in replicating this approach in other regions.

Similar approaches are supported by HI in Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali, and by Sightsavers in Cameroon, Sierra Leone and Senegal.



An itinerant teacher provides individual support to a child with a disability in an inclusive school. Source: Humanity & Inclusion, Togo, 2014.

Improving the quality of teaching and learning

In order to succeed, 'education for all' must be inclusive, taking a cross-cutting approach to offer quality education to all learners^{lxii}. Inclusive education offers a tremendous opportunity to improve learning content and teaching practices for all in countries where learning performance and transition to secondary school remain very low. An education system committed to inclusive education relies on qualified and motivated teachers, and tailored teaching and learning methods, to provide better-quality teaching.^{lxiii} It also involves all school stakeholders (directors, assistants, and itinerant and specialist teachers) and the community in which the children live, starting with parents. Recognising the complexity of educational contexts in WCA, inclusive education builds on the 'universal design for learning' (UDL) approach, which recognises the unique capabilities and needs of individual learners, and high expectations for all learners in the context of flexible learning and curriculum.^{lxiv}



**Zambo (centre), age nine, learns with his peers in an inclusive classroom.
Source: Sightsavers, Rodrig Mbok, Mbalmayo (Cameroon), 2019.**

"I am nine years old. I like to play, I play with my friends, I have a lot of friends. I like to play dodgeball and all games. I love to sing and dance. I don't find anything difficult at school and I like to play. My favourite subject is mathematics and I want to become a teacher when I grow up. I like Spiderman because he's one of my toys, I like to talk about Spiderman with others. I like to play with my friends, yes, I have brothers and sisters." - Zambo

Recommendations

In order to remove obstacles and ensure that each disabled girl and boy in WCA has access to quality education, this policy briefing recommends all stakeholders (governments and ministries, technical and financial partners, civil society, private sector, schools, teachers, communities and students) work together to reform education systems for inclusion in WCA. These recommendations identify some ways of promoting inclusive education for children with disabilities that can be used throughout the region.

Political and institutional

- **Donors must support inclusive education:** International and multilateral donors, as well as all development partners who invest in education programmes, should further support disability and gender-sensitive approaches and define clear criteria and indicators on inclusion for beneficiaries. Donors should consider increasing **targeted funding** so that States fill the gaps in the supply of inclusive education services in their sector plans. Donors should support the twin-track approach by providing resources to strengthen inclusive education systems as a whole, at national level, while also supporting strategies which address the specific barriers faced by children with disabilities, and other learners with specific needs, at an individual level.
- **Accountability mechanisms should be implemented** to ensure aid supports specific learning needs and gaps. The use of disability markers (for example, the OECD-DAC marker on the inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities) to track financing is recommended. NGOs, for their part, should strengthen technical assistance to ministries of education on inclusive education for girls and boys with disabilities.
- **States must be clear about total resources needed** to implement inclusive education policy and ESPs and where these resources will come from. Governments should mobilise an increased share of domestic resources for free, quality and inclusive national education. National education budgets should represent between 4 per cent to 6 per cent of national GDP and 20 per cent of total budgets. Domestic and external financing must work together more catalytically and in complementarity for system transformation. This includes addressing not just the volume of domestic financing but efficiency and accountability for education spending.
- **Inclusive education policy and financing should be cross-cutting:** States must adopt a comprehensive approach to combating exclusion from education and a cross-cutting inclusive education policy with concrete actions and budgets. In particular, the specific needs of girls with disabilities must be reflected in education sector strategies and plans. The plans must take into account the multiple layers of discrimination based on disability type and severity, sex, ethnic or socioeconomic origin, refugee or displaced status, and so on.
- **Prioritise strengthening multi-sectoral education frameworks** as part of inclusive education reform. Achieving truly inclusive education means that different and diverse government ministries, bodies and other sectors collaborate and coordinate effectively around key activities and processes such as data collection, planning and

implementation. Also, while inclusive education should be the responsibility of the ministry of education, other ministries also need to be involved.

- **Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) should play a key role** in local education groups and education sector review processes. Donors should support NGOs and civil society undertaking advocacy and service delivery in the area of disability and inclusive education. This includes a focus on initiatives creating linkages and partnerships across sectors and between the different stakeholders, such as public-private partnerships or between NGOs, civil society and government agencies.

Data

- **Establish harmonised data collection.** Set up monitoring and evaluation systems to measure progress made in disability and gender equality inclusion in education, using appropriate gender and disability disaggregated indicators and data at national level. Tools such as the Washington Group Short Set of Questions or a contextualised version of the Child Functioning Module (UNICEF/Washington Group), should make it possible to include information on disability, learning outcomes for students with disabilities, school accessibility and teachers' skills in inclusive education in Education Management Information Systems.

Social barriers: stigma and discrimination

- **Governments must tackle attitudinal and behavioural change** to improve social inclusion. This approach should involve partnering with and consulting OPDs on public education campaigns, alongside local level interventions around school development planning, school management committees and parent-teacher associations.

Access

- **Provide free primary education and assistive devices and learning resources** to facilitate access to education for all. Cash transfers in the form of subsidies, grants and scholarships for children with disabilities who have special educational needs and from very disadvantaged families should be provided, in coordination with the relevant ministries (education, health, social action and so on).
- **Use Universal design standards: Build accessible schools and classrooms suitable for all, that respect of universal access standards and meet the** needs of both girls and boys with disabilities.
- **Reform the role of special schools** and support them to become resource centres, helping mainstream schools to be better equipped to support girls and boys with disabilities.

Quality: learning and teaching, completion, transition

- **Improve school leadership and governance** for inclusion by providing head teachers and other education personnel, such as the inspectorate, with inclusion training and ongoing mentoring and support.
- **Improve teacher training for inclusion** and build capacity of national, regional, district and local level inclusive education advisers.
- **Reform teaching materials and the school curriculum.** Review and adjust to reflect more inclusive societies.
- **Support transition of learners with disabilities between grades, levels and types of education** (early childhood through to tertiary and non-formal education). Focus on the transition between primary and secondary levels, adapt exams so they are accessible for children with disabilities, and set up inclusive referral mechanisms.
- **Develop an education-training continuum strategy** to maximise equal opportunities for academic achievement for young people with disabilities throughout their learning journey, with a particular focus on girls with disabilities.
- **Ensure the participation of girls and boys or adults with disabilities**, particularly girls and women, in decision-making inside the classroom, in schools, local government, parliaments and international bodies.

Crises and conflict

- **Strengthen collaboration between humanitarian and development** institutions and organisations to improve access to inclusive and equitable education for all children and young people with disabilities affected by crisis or conflict. Enhanced stakeholder coordination at the onset of a crisis fosters a more inclusive and sustainable response.
- **Ensure inclusive financing and technical expertise** is made available to conduct resilience and preparedness planning for crises to build back better and ensure no one is left behind.

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A large, stylized graphic of a human eye, composed of concentric circles and a central iris-like shape, rendered in a lighter shade of the background purple.

We work with partners in low
and middle income countries to
eliminate avoidable blindness
and promote equal opportunities
for people with disabilities.

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