The case for equitable education

Background

Over the course of this three-year project the Leonard Cheshire Research Centre worked with research teams in four countries: Kenya, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Zambia. We set out to better understand the relationship between disability and development in each country across four domains: education, health, labour markets and social protection. These countries have all ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). They were chosen as they demonstrate a range of stages of economic and social development, as measured by the Human Development Index.¹

The research examined the hypothesis that as socioeconomic development improves, people with disabilities are at risk of being left out or left behind, creating a disability and development gap. Our aim was to identify where the gap exists, see whether it widens as development progresses, and understand the mechanisms needed to close the gap.

This paper explores our key findings in relation to education. Education is one of the key indicators of development,² and despite arguments about under investment and lack of progress globally, education remains key to closing the equity gap. However, millions of children remain out of school;³ and though exact numbers remain unknown, many of these are children with disabilities. Not only does this lack of access and learning create inequalities, but this deprivation can continue throughout the lifecycle, reducing chances and opportunities.

Various initiatives have been put in place to break this cycle and improve access to education for children and adults with disabilities, shifting the focus away from ‘special’ education to inclusive education within mainstream schools. Such initiatives are not without challenges, including different understandings and conceptualisations of what inclusive education is, how it is funded and resourced, and what success and good practice looks like.

Methodology: This mixed-methods research used a range of interrelated components, including policy and secondary data analysis, a household survey of 4,839 households (13,597 adults and 10,756 children), 55 focus group discussions and 112 key informant interviews across the four countries.

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¹ http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi
² https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/
³ https://www.unicef.org/education/bege_61667.html
⁴ https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/
⁵ https://www.globalpartnership.org/focus-areas/children-with-disabilities
Education: our key findings

In all four countries studied, children with disabilities are significantly less likely to be in school; this is despite legislation and commitments that assure them equal access to education (see Figure 1), including free primary education.

The main reasons given for children with disabilities not being in school were the cost of education, and the needs of the child and concerns about safety of the child. There was a preference for special schools in all four countries, where children with disabilities are educated separately from non-disabled children. This preference was significantly less in Sierra Leone than Kenya; however, this may reflect availability rather than inclination. Interestingly, fewer respondents in Kenya agreed that it was better for children without disabilities to be separated from children with disabilities, despite support for special schools. This may indicate that advocacy programmes are more effective there.

As Figure 2 shows, in all four countries, cost was a significant barrier to education for all children, including children with disabilities.
In Uganda and Sierra Leone, children were more likely to leave school to get married, and age was a significant factor in access for children with and without disabilities in these two countries, as well as in Zambia. Caregivers’ perceptions about learning all revealed some interesting findings. Respondents reported concerns for children with and without disabilities’ abilities to learn, though less so in Kenya. This may reflect broader concerns about the education system in general, rather than the child’s abilities. (see Figure 3).

Figure 2: Cost of education (% agreement across households with and without disabled children; N = 4839 households)

Figure 3: Inability to learn (% agreement across households with and without disabled children; N = 4839 households)
Key findings: Zambia

Even though the Zambian economy has been growing steadily over the past decades, socioeconomic inequality and unemployment are still key challenges for the population. The government has begun to put a number of policies and systems in place, including social protection mechanisms, to support adults and children with disabilities. Despite these advances, people with disabilities encounter a number of challenges when it comes to realising their potential, including access to education. Our research shows that this is due to a combination of factors, including a lack of inter-ministerial coordination. This has resulted in a lack of clarity around budget allocation and poor alignment, which in turn impacts on policy effectiveness. This is compounded by a lack of enforcement mechanisms to implement policy, resulting in persistent exclusion from services and structures.

‘The quality [of education] is not good. When you look at the performance in general, you will find that the performance of children with special needs is so bad so much that it does not help them when they go out in the field. You will find that like the [children with] hearing impairments, you will rarely find them managing to pass with school certificate. If they do, those few subjects they have very low grades that will not prepare them to go and join the community for the jobs that they may apply for.’

Teacher, Male, Zambia

Our research highlighted a number of recommendations to address these gaps, including strengthening inter-ministerial coordination to more effectively support mainstreaming and align budgets to ensure there are financial allocations specifically targeted to people with disabilities.

Key findings: Kenya

Kenya has made impressive gains in terms of socioeconomic growth over the past three decades. This has led to overall improvements in the provision of education, health, social protection services and employment. The new Constitution (2010) not only created 47 new counties, which provide the vast majority of public services, but also strengthened the rights of people with disabilities nationally. Despite this, our data highlights an equity gap for adults and children with disabilities, particularly in the field of education.

According to our household survey sample, the majority of Kenyan school-age children do attend school. However, only 78% of children with disabilities were attending school, compared to 95% of children without disabilities. The chart below (Figure 4) shows that this gap was greater in urban areas than rural: 30% of children with disabilities were not in school in urban areas compared to 5% of their non-disabled peers; in rural areas, the figures were 13% and 4% respectively. This highlights a risk of people with disabilities being left behind in more developed areas within the same country.

The household survey data found that significantly more children with disabilities were out of school compared to those without disabilities, although unlike in Kenya (see below) we did not find evidence that this varied between rural and urban settings. Secondary data analysis suggests that the gap in education between adults with and without disabilities is present, but relatively narrow. However, our policy analysis revealed that current education policies mainly focus on early years, meaning that there is potential for this gap to widen in future. Quality is also an issue.

‘For policies actually, we are one of the countries with the best policies in the region. The major challenge is implementation and what leads to poor implementation is the lack of capacity and the lack of sensitisation on the issues in the policies and the law.’

Social Welfare Officer, Female, Zambia
Children with disabilities were more likely to experience significant barriers to accessing education compared to non-disabled children, with factors ranging from type and severity of disability; socio-economic status of the household; availability and proximity to learning institutions; school infrastructure and resources, including skilled educators and support staff in learning institutions; and stigma and discrimination.

If teachers are to play a significant role, pre- and in-service training, with regular updates, is vital. The Kenyan Government has shown a strong commitment to disability issues, as evidenced by a range of policies aiming to address rights and inclusion. These include the recent ‘Sector Policy for Learners and Trainees with Disabilities’ (May 2018), though it is as yet too early to examine its impact. Our research highlighted gaps in funding and a lack of robust monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. We also identified a lack of definitional clarity around disability, which can hinder access to existing education and social protection programmes, as well as lead to problems in generating useable data. Administrative devolution has further complicated the picture, with distinct differences in policy and implementation between districts.

‘My plea to the government is that they make sure when a child is born with a disability they are able to mix and learn with other children who are not disabled. There should be teachers who can care for the child with special needs but if special schools are being built in different places for disabled people the stigma will never end.’

Male student with visual impairment, Kenya
Key findings: Uganda

Uganda has a range of favourable policies in the health, employment, social protection and education sectors. However, many are still under review, including the National Special Needs and Inclusive Education Policy (in the process of enactment) and the Persons with Disabilities Bill, 2016 (awaiting cabinet approval).

Policymakers, practitioners and advocates have worked to improve the lives of people with disabilities in Uganda for more than two decades. Through legislation and policies, and Uganda has one of the strongest disability movements in Africa. However, our results show that limited geographical coverage, inconsistent quality and unsustainability remain huge challenges to positive – and equitable – impact.

These differences in inclusion were attributed to a range of factors. These include higher levels of increased stigma towards disability within rural communities, and practical issues such as terrain, transportation and the centralisation of specialist services within urban areas.

Findings from the household survey in Uganda were consistent with a wide gap in educational attainment. For example, a greater share of children with disabilities were out of school compared to children without disabilities (See Figure 1 above). Moreover, in Uganda, as in other countries, there is a bigger gap in educational attainment between younger cohorts of people with and without disabilities, compared to older cohorts (see Figure 5 below). This suggests that the education gap not only exists but may widen in the future.

‘Implementation of policies is one of the major gaps, for example the education sector is inclusive on paper. You cannot talk of inclusiveness when you have not trained any teachers with special skills to handle special children.’

Visually impaired male, Uganda

Figure 5: Gap in educational attainment by cohort (N = 13,597 adults)
Education is the key. Where people with disabilities have acquired education, their life has improved:

‘...with confidence, I can attest to that, I attest to that to say that you would see many beggars of people with disabilities on the streets but ... all those who have acquired university education they are working, they are in government ... so they have been mainstreamed.’

Employee in Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, Uganda

Results from the household survey also showed many household and institutional factors constitute barriers to education for children with disabilities. Uganda needs to ensure that more is done to enhance the structures and processes in place to remove persistent barriers and facilitate equitable inclusion for all citizens.

Key findings: Sierra Leone

While some socioeconomic progress has been made in recent decades in Sierra Leone, a number of factors, including the recent Ebola outbreak and continuing lack of economic diversity, means that the country still faces a range of daunting development challenges. These include poverty, and a lack of services and structures. People with disabilities also face significant challenges, despite the enactment of the Disability Act (2011) and the setting up of the National Disability Commission. Although the availability of accurate representative disability data is generally poor, extant smaller scale studies point to a substantial population of children and adults with disabilities that are currently under-served by governmental efforts to address inequality.

Findings from Sierra Leone indicate a narrower gap between children with and without disabilities than the other three countries; however this is due to generalised poverty across the vast majority of the population. These results highlight the need to intervene to prevent the gap emerging in the first place, including harnessing the resilience of individuals and communities to work with state and non-state actors to ensure equitable and inclusive development.

‘The government should definitely come to our aid. Disability is not inability. We too have a role to play towards the development in the country. We should be supported and not be shunned.’

Person with a disability, key informant interview, Freetown

‘...with confidence, I can attest to that, I attest to that to say that you would see many beggars of people with disabilities on the streets but ... all those who have acquired university education they are working, they are in government ... so they have been mainstreamed.’

Employee in Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, Uganda
Recommendations

Our results show that adults and children with disabilities are being left behind in education, which has a cumulative effect across the life cycle, including equitable opportunities to access to employment, healthcare and social protection. Existing policies and processes are going some way to close this gap – but more needs to be done. Here are our key recommendations:

1. **A targeted approach is required to close the disability and education development gap.** This includes investing in complementary and adult education and training to enable those who have missed out to have the opportunity to catch up and bridge this gap.

2. **Accountability mechanisms must be strengthened.** Even where policies are in place, a consistent finding across all the countries was weak implementation due to a lack of monitoring and accountability mechanisms. Implementation plans – with clear targets and indicators – are necessary to show progress towards the goal of education for all.

3. **Specific – and harmonised – budgetary allocation for disability issues is needed.** Current systems include financing education for children with disabilities through ministries of social welfare, or funding only special schools, or including them in the general education capitation grants. None of these address the need for additional resources to support inclusion on a broader scale.

4. **We need improved data collection that is linked to meaningful targets.** Current education targets tend to focus on enrolment rather than completion rates. This means that children who have irregular attendance or drop out of school are not adequately captured, and attendance data may give an incomplete picture. Not only that, but current systems tend to only capture children in school. This means that those out of school continue to be overlooked. More consideration needs to be given as to how to identify these children in the first place, and ensure there are mechanisms in place to support them to access education or alternatives, enabling them to catch up. More community-led initiatives may facilitate this.

5. **The education of children with disabilities should be a core part of the teacher training curriculum, with regular refresher courses.** This should be government led, with support from specialist non-state actors, using a range of technologies, as required. This should also encompass support staff including classroom assistants. As it stands, almost all inclusive education programmes are delivered by NGOs, absolving States of responsibility. This will perpetuate divisions and inadequate budgeting.

The project was led by the Leonard Cheshire Research Centre.

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For more information about the project, please visit [gap.leonardcheshire.org](http://gap.leonardcheshire.org)

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