

# Making inclusive education a reality for children of the world with disabilities

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The implementation of the basic right to education for people with disabilities presents a major challenge. This was highlighted by the World Health Organization (WHO), which in June 2011 published the World Report on Disability. In it, WHO had revised upwards its estimate of the number of people with disabilities from 10 to 15 per cent; in other words, there are now more than 1 billion people with disabilities in the world. This means that in the Global South, where 70 per cent of the population are under 30, there are between 300 and 400 million children with disabilities. A number of recent door-to-door surveys came up with the figure of 14 per cent of children with disabilities. Many states such as India and Pakistan officially record having 2 to 3 per cent of children with disabilities. This under-representation leads to insufficient resources and planning to implement the inclusion of children with disabilities in schools.

Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2 requires that, by 2015, all primary age children are given the opportunity to complete primary education. But the long-term effects of the 2008/9 economic crisis and subsequent instability have meant that this goal will now not be reached, as many families have been forced into greater poverty and cannot afford the choice of ensuring their children go to school. This is particularly true for girls and children with disabilities. Even before 2009, when progress was being made in increasing enrolment in primary schools, in the countries that had almost 90–95 per cent enrolment, more than 40 per cent of those not in school were children with disabilities. UNICEF estimate that over 90 per cent of disabled children in the Global South do not attend school, and this figure is higher if they are also girls. The drop-out rate for children with disabilities is high, as teachers fail to adapt their teaching so that these children can achieve. Moreover, a disproportionately low number go on to secondary and higher education. Life-cycles of poverty are therefore reinforced as large numbers of young people with disabilities fail to make a decent living.

## UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities

Yet, Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which came into force on 3 May 2008, requires that signatory states ensure *all* children with disabilities are able to fully participate in the state education system, and that this should be an 'inclusive education system at all levels'. So far, 114 countries have ratified this Treaty, including 28 in the Commonwealth. While education for all is an obligation

subject to progressive realisation, and dependent on the resources available, every country that signs up to the Treaty needs to be planning to transform their education system to meet the needs of all learners.

Article 24 requires that all signatory countries ensure their children and young people with disabilities are included in the education system, in order to develop their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential. This right is to be delivered within an inclusive primary and secondary education system, from which people with disabilities should not be excluded.

Reasonable accommodations should be provided for individual requirements and support provided in individualised programmes to facilitate their effective social and academic education. In addition, educational environments, transport, information and communications must be made accessible (Article 9) – for example, Braille, sign language, and alternative and augmented forms of communication. At the same time, all pupils should receive awareness-raising instruction so that they learn to have positive attitudes towards people with disabilities (Article 8). All teachers need to be educated in the relevant means and methods to make the above possible.

At the heart of the UNCRPD is a paradigm shift away from the traditional/ charity/medical view of people with disabilities as objects, towards an empowering social/human rights view, where people with disabilities are subjects who are at the heart of changing and improving their lot. Essential to this approach is the central involvement of disabled people's organisations (DPOs) and parent associations fighting for equality for their children with disabilities. The motto of the UNCRPD-making process is 'Nothing About Us Without Us'. This is recognised in Article 1 of the Convention, which sees disability as not limited to the person and their impairment, but states:

*Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.*

These barriers are many and varied but what they have in common is that they have been developed and constructed by human beings and are therefore reversible, if the political will is present. One such barrier is the idea that the problem rests with the child and their impairment; this is the special educational needs (SEN) approach. Another barrier is confusion and lack of clarity about what constitutes inclusive education.



Photo: Commonwealth Secretariat

The author (front, second left), Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma and other participants at a 2012 Commonwealth meeting on human rights

*UNESCO sees inclusive education as a process of addressing and responding to diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children<sup>1</sup>.*

This has been applicable to all excluded groups and is certainly important in creating child-friendly schools, but experience has taught us that this definition is insufficient to ensure the inclusion of children with disabilities. Strong negative attitudes in many cultures, combined with fear and ignorance from teachers and educational administrators, have resulted in inadequate adjustments – in teaching, curriculum, pace and means of communication – to successfully engage learners with disabilities in the classroom.

### A new approach to inclusion

According to experts on inclusive education, what is required is a twin track approach. Firstly, general child-friendly classrooms where peer support is encouraged; and secondly, disability specific adjustments to meet the individual learning needs of the particular child. This second track needs backing up by in-service training for teachers and by employing specialist itinerant teachers, who can

either develop competence in communications, such as Braille, sign language or alternative and augmented systems, or provide advice on the pedagogy of including children with different learning difficulties, such as the use of differentiation, scaffolding and reinforcement. Most importantly, teachers need encouragement and support to realise that they do have the skills and understanding to transform their classrooms into effective inclusive classrooms for all learners with disabilities.

Inclusion should not be confused with integration, where the disabled child has to manage in a largely unadapted mainstream class with teachers and peers not prepared to welcome or support them. Because integration tends not to work, some believe that children with disabilities need to be educated in special schools, which are very resource intensive and can only ever be available to the very few. However, these schools do not prepare them for life in society and have even been shown to provide an inferior level of education to good inclusive mainstream schools.

### Steps to developing inclusive education

Throughout the world and across the Commonwealth, there are pockets of good practice where inclusive education has taken root in schools, districts or the entire country. A number of levers of change can be identified from these examples of good practice that can help develop inclusive education elsewhere.

1. Parents of children with disabilities and DSOs must be involved at every level – local, regional, national and international. In so doing, they can bring an understanding of what is required to challenge the widespread oppression that is disablism.
2. Capacity-building, i.e. training for parents and disabled people, as well as for in-service teachers and beginner teachers on including children with disabilities and on using child-centred approaches.
3. Mobilising the local community to support the inclusion of children with disabilities, and bringing their resources and energy to support campaigning – for example, making buildings more accessible.
4. Influencing governments to provide:
  - Inclusive early childhood care and education for children with disabilities
  - One ministry for all children's education
  - A flexible grade system and child-centred curriculum and assessment
  - Incentives for families to enrol disabled children
  - Recruitment and training for disabled teachers
  - Promoting inclusive education in the media and to all parents
  - Awareness-raising programmes for all pupils and students to have positive attitudes to people with disabilities.
5. Peer support – the biggest and most effective resource for inclusion is mobilising peers. Evidence has shown that all benefit from more collaborative approaches. Empowering and developing the voice of children with disabilities is vital.
6. Targeted funding towards:
  - Mobilising the international community to increase targeted aid and donations
  - Ensuring local control of funding by DPOs and parents/teachers
  - Challenging corruption
  - Developing low-cost low-tech solutions for support rather than high cost high tech.

In implementing Article 24 of the UNCRPD, there are many examples of effective inclusive practice, ranging from individual schools to districts and regions to whole countries. All of them illustrate that developing inclusive education for children with disabilities will improve the education system for all.

Fundamentally, this is about attitudinal change at every level of society. Without this transformation, mass human rights abuses and great wastage of human potential will continue indefinitely.

In the discussions leading up to the framing of what will replace the Millennium Development Goals it is essential that the inclusion of children with disabilities is explicitly mentioned, and that the barriers which continue to lead to their exclusion, high drop-out, non-completion and failure to progress to secondary and tertiary education are fully solved.

#### Endnote

- <sup>1</sup> See R. Operti, *Inclusive Education and Inclusive Curriculum: Moving the EFA agenda forward*, UNESCO.

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