Equal right, equal opportunity: Inclusive education for children with disabilities [1]

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Executive summary

The estimated 1 billion people who live with a disability face a multitude of barriers to participating equally in society. In particular, their right to education is often not realised, which in turn hinders their access to other rights and creates enormous obstacles to reaching their potential and effectively participating in their communities.

Globally, an estimated 93 million children – or 1 in 20 of those aged up to 14 years of age – live with a moderate or severe disability. In most low- and middle-income countries, children with disabilities are more likely to be out of school than any other group of children. Children with disabilities have very low rates of initial enrolment. Even if they do attend school, children living with disabilities are often more likely to drop out and leave school early. In some countries, having a disability can more than double the chance of a child not being in school, compared to their non-disabled peers. In Burkina Faso, having a disability increases the risk of children being out of school by two and a half times. It is, therefore, unsurprising that in many countries children with disabilities make up the vast majority of those out of school. For example, in Nepal, it is estimated that 85% of all children out-of-school are disabled.

For those children with disabilities who actually manage to enter classrooms, the quality and form of schooling received – often in segregated schools – can act to powerfully compound exclusion from the mainstream and confirm pre-existing societal notions about disability.

Tackling this severe discrimination is a matter of urgency on several counts. Firstly, this denial of the right to education robs children of the future benefits of an education and the opportunity to access other rights – for example, by limiting employment opportunities or participation in civic affairs later in life. It restricts full participation in society, exacerbating exclusion, and can limit a person's chance of escaping poverty. Far too often, exclusion from the classroom marks the beginning of a lifetime of exclusion from mainstream society. This and other barriers faced by people living with disabilities means they are usually among the poorest of the poor.

A lack of focus on educating disabled children is also impacting on the chances of delivering on the international promise to achieve universal primary education – a globally-agreed target set out in the Education For All and Millennium Development Goals. As most low- and middle-income countries have massively expanded access, the gap between the 'majority' now in school, and the 'forgotten minorities', is becoming increasingly pronounced – leaving some (including millions of children with disabilities) ever more marginalised, excluded and on the peripheries of society. For example, in Bolivia, it is estimated that 95% of the population aged 6 to 11 years are in school, while only 38% of children with disabilities are.

When a disabled child does get the opportunity to receive a quality education, doors are opened. This enables them to secure other rights throughout their lifetime, fostering better access to jobs, health and other services. For education to play this role as 'an enabling right', it must be of high quality, available equitably, built to tackle discrimination and allow each child to flourish according to their own talents and interests.

In recent years, human rights frameworks have begun to inform a vision for delivering on the right to education for disabled children, and articulating what this might look in practice. The 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was a milestone in this regard. The CRPD established inclusive education as the key mechanism to deliver the right to education for disabled children. Inclusive education systems can be defined as all children learning together in mainstream classrooms in their locality or community, irrespective of the different range of abilities and disabilities, with teaching methods, materials and school environments that address the needs of all girls and boys. Inclusive education systems are grounded in a rights-based analysis, which can empower learners, celebrate diversity, combat discrimination and promote more inclusive societies. This can be a powerful tool in addressing inequalities. It can also tackle discrimination by challenging widely-held attitudes and behaviours – helping us to celebrate and embrace the diversity in our societies.

Furthermore, the creation of inclusive education systems is fundamental to achieving better quality in education and realising the human

rights of all children. Inclusive education can raise the quality bar across education systems, by using strategies that cater for naturally diverse learning styles of all students, whilst accommodating the specific learning needs of some students. They also serve to target and include other marginalised groups of children, helping to ensure inclusion for all.

However, the current challenges faced by children with disabilities in realising their right to education remain profound. But there is an increasingly clear set of areas of action for governments, donors and the international community. This report synthesises current evidence on the policy responses which can help bring down the common barriers faced by disabled children in gaining a quality education, across seven inter-dependent strategies – from the family, local communities and national government, through to the international community.

Region: United States [3]