

REPORT  
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# Let's break silos now! Achieving disability-inclusive education in a post-COVID world





## Humanity & Inclusion

Humanity & Inclusion (HI) is an independent and impartial aid organisation working in situations of poverty and exclusion, conflict and disaster. Humanity & Inclusion works alongside persons with disabilities and vulnerable populations; taking action and bearing witness in order to respond to their essential needs, improve their living conditions and promote respect for their dignity and fundamental rights. On 24 January 2018, the global Handicap International network became Humanity & Inclusion. This network is composed of a Federation which implements our programmes in around sixty countries and of eight national associations. These programmes, or national associations, are known as “Handicap International” or “Humanity & Inclusion” depending on the country.

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## List of Acronyms

<b>DfID</b>	Department for International Development (UK)	<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>DHS</b>	Demographic and Health Survey	<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>ECD</b>	Early Childhood Development	<b>UNCEDAW</b>	United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
<b>FCDO</b>	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (UK)	<b>UNCRC</b>	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product	<b>UNCRPD</b>	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
<b>GPE</b>	Global Partnership for Education	<b>UNDESA</b>	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
<b>IDDC</b>	International Disability and Development Consortium	<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization	<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children’s Fund
<b>MHPSS</b>	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support	<b>WASH</b>	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
<b>MICS</b>	Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys	<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization
<b>ODA</b>	Official Development Assistance		
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goals		

# Table of contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
List of Acronyms.....	3
Executive Summary .....	5
Disability-inclusive education – an urgent call for renewed action.....	10
1. Children with disabilities are still denied their rights.....	12
2. Inclusive education systems will ensure that every child can access quality education and thrive.....	16
3. Inclusive education system reform must be accelerated to reach 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals .....	19
4. COVID-19: Opportunity in crisis - let's improve education systems .....	21
5. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides urgent impetus for prioritising multi-sectoral, inclusive education strategies .....	24
6. Strengthening multi-sectoral education frameworks - a universal priority.....	26
7. Building multi-sectoral, disability- inclusive education systems: key considerations .....	32
8. Priorities for action: recommendations for inclusive education in low- and middle-income countries .....	39
Annex 1. Looking beyond SDG 4 - A reference guide to inclusive education and the Sustainable Development Goals .....	42
References.....	47

# Executive Summary

## Disability-inclusive education – an urgent call for renewed action

A world where inclusive education can flourish is also a world that can nurture inclusive societies. Inclusive learning environments consider diversity an asset and, accordingly, they cater for the different needs of all learners, so that they learn, grow and thrive together. Working towards this vision is critical for reducing the vast levels of inequality and discrimination currently faced by millions of persons across the globe. This is especially so for the millions of children with disabilities, many of whom struggle to receive even the most basic of educations.

The exclusion of learners with disabilities from education is due to many reasons, including inaccessible school facilities, a lack of assistive technologies, poor health, prejudice, discrimination

and stigma. The interconnected and complex nature of achieving inclusive, quality education for all therefore requires stakeholders to break with siloed approaches and to work collaboratively across economic, social, cultural and protection sectors and domains.

Global progress in building inclusive education systems is now threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has severely disrupted the educations of most children, and has seen funds diverted away from the education sector. Despite this setback, governments and the global community are now in a unique position to learn from the pandemic and to renew efforts to improve education.

## Children with disabilities are still denied their rights

Everyone has a fundamental right to education. The right to quality, inclusive education is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (UNCEDAW), the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and targeted by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 of the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. Yet, worldwide, education systems are still failing children, especially those with

disabilities, and even more so for girls with disabilities. Some 50% of children with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries are excluded from education.<sup>(1)</sup> Only 42% of girls with disabilities completed primary school, compared to 51% of boys with disabilities.<sup>(2)</sup>

Renewed national commitment and actions alongside sustained support from the international community are now vital if we are to fulfil our education obligations and targets for children.

## Inclusive education systems ensure that every child can access quality education and thrive

We cannot afford to leave another generation of children behind. The exclusion of many children from quality, inclusive education impacts negatively on their lives and their futures, as well as on national socio-economic development. Inclusive education has been shown to be cost-effective and to improve the quality of teaching

and learning for **all children**, not just those with disabilities. Inclusive education is the **only strategy** which can reimagine currently inadequate education systems, and ensure that all children, including those with disabilities, can access quality education and thrive in an inclusive environment, free from segregation and discrimination.

## Inclusive education system reform must be accelerated to reach Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals

Immediate and additional efforts need to be made to accelerate and sustain more rapid global progress towards achieving inclusive education for all, as set out by the SDG 4 targets. Where progress has been made in legal and policy reform, this is not always matched by national programming and implementation. The uneven progress achieved so far has experienced

additional setbacks as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This urgently requires stakeholders at all levels to galvanise their commitment and political will towards fulfilling all children's rights, including those with disabilities, and to immediately prioritise more funds, resources and strategies which target inclusive, quality education.

## COVID-19: Opportunity in crisis - let's improve education systems

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the already significant challenges for many children with and without disabilities in accessing quality, inclusive education. Systemic inequalities in education have been highlighted and magnified by the pandemic, and children with disabilities have experienced increased exclusion, marginalisation, poverty and vulnerability as a result. Children with disabilities are also at the greatest risk of dropping out of school as a result of the pandemic.

However, the pandemic also represents an important opportunity to address weak and exclusionary education systems, with a focus on strengthening education frameworks and capacities by using inclusive, multi-sectoral strategies. Strategies should not only address the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic on schools and learners, but also build resilience to future disease outbreaks and other shocks.

## The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides impetus for multi-sectoral, inclusive education strategies

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals of 2030 Agenda are more than just a set of development targets; they are a blueprint for action based around multi-sectoral strategies and partnerships. The 2030 Agenda addresses a multiplicity of key structural inequalities including gender, age and disability, which prevent many people from realising their rights. Eliminating structural inequalities requires the development of coordinated strategies which take into account their interdependency, and work across the different economic, social and environmental sectors.

Sustainable Development Goal 4 is the bedrock of actions to improve education for all. Disability is specifically included in SDG target 4.5, which requires equal access to education for vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities. Target 4.A requires education to be disability-sensitive and for learning environments to be safe, non-violent, and inclusive for all. A number of interdependencies exist between SDG 4 and other SDGs, which can either impact negatively, or enable, inclusive education. Indeed, working with the education sector is a critical factor in most other SDGs meeting their own targets.

## Strengthening multi-sectoral education frameworks - a universal priority

Stakeholders across several sectors have essential roles to play in achieving quality, inclusive education for all.

Transformation towards disability-inclusive education systems should be led by an empowered ministry of education that is systematically collaborating with other

ministerial departments and other sectors at different levels. Multi-sectoral education approaches of this nature should be further prioritised, and require additional and sustained support to render them fully effective in ensuring the rights of all children to quality education.

## Building multi-sectoral, disability-inclusive education systems: key considerations

**Putting children at the centre.** The needs and meaningful participation of the child should be the starting point when developing inclusive education approaches.

**Twin-track.** This two-pronged strategy ensures that the mainstream education systems (and other sectors supporting education) become more inclusive, while children with disabilities are empowered to succeed by being provided with any additional necessary and specific supports related to their individual needs. Twin-track education strategies are designed to leave no child behind while education systems take steps to become fully inclusive.

**Collaboration with civil society and non-governmental organisations.** Strong collaboration with this sector is crucial. Organisations of persons with disabilities, as well as parents and other stakeholders, have been at the forefront of advocacy for better education. Organisations are also key service providers for persons with disabilities, helping fill the gaps in public service provision.

**Enhancing cooperation and coordination between central and local authorities.** Many countries have moved to decentralise education decision-making and spending to

sub-national levels. Effective, well-coordinated decentralisation strategies have the potential to improve the quality of education services and to use education resources more efficiently.

**Connected, interagency service delivery for maximised returns.** When services are available as part of a comprehensive and integrated package and can be easily accessed through a single service point, they are more likely to be taken up. This has significant benefit for children with complex needs, including those with disabilities. Services offered in this way are also more cost-effective.

**Collecting more, and better, data on disability. Improving data is a priority for effective disability-inclusive education strategies and frameworks.** The “Washington Group Short Set of Questions” and the “Child Functioning Module” are robust and valuable tools which should be used to collect disability-disaggregated data.

**Exploring strategies to include the youngest children.** Truly inclusive education systems also need to include younger children, aged 0-8 years old. Currently, young children with disabilities are often excluded from early childhood development policy and programmes.

# Priorities for action: recommendations for inclusive education in low- and middle-income countries

## Allocate and track more resources for inclusive education

### Governments should:

- **Mobilise** an increased share of domestic resources for free, quality and inclusive national education. National education budgets should represent between 4% to 6% of national Gross Domestic Product and 20% of total budgets.<sup>(3)</sup>
- **Direct** specific streams of finances and resources to the most vulnerable and excluded children.

### Donors should:

- **Prioritise** and increase financial and technical support, bilaterally and multilaterally, to low- and middle-income countries for inclusive education system reform. There is a US\$148 billion annual financing gap in low- and lower-middle-income countries to achieve SDG 4 from now until 2030. Additional costs due to COVID-19 related school closures risk increasing this financing gap by up to one-third.<sup>(4)</sup>

- **Earmark** funding for disability-inclusive education, using disability tags such as the “OECD-DAC Marker” to track funding for inclusion and report against equity indicators.
- **Contribute** to the regular replenishments of multi-lateral funds, as the Global Partnership for Education funding campaign for the cycle 2021-2025.
- **Support** twin-track approaches by providing resources to strengthen inclusive education systems while also supporting strategies which address the specific barriers faced by the most marginalised learners, including children with disabilities.

## Accelerate action to radically transform education systems

### Donors and governments should:

- **Commit** to improve education systems by supporting and undertaking reviews and revisions of education systems and committing to inclusive education strategies and frameworks.
- **Build** COVID-19 and disease outbreak mitigation and resilience strategies into revised education frameworks.

### Governments should:

- **Galvanise** political commitment and efforts to fulfil obligations and commitments under the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and Sustainable Development Goal 4.

### Donors should:

- **Increase** technical and financial support to low- and middle-income countries in their efforts to transition towards inclusive education systems, and prioritise investments supporting public, free, and quality education that is inclusive for all learners.

### Non-governmental organisations and civil society should:

- **Hold** duty-bearers accountable on commitments to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- **Support** government decision-makers and authorities to develop and implement inclusive education frameworks and strategies by providing expertise and insight.



## Move towards multi-sectoral frameworks for inclusive education

### Government, civil society and non-governmental organisations should:

- **Work** in partnership and across sectors to ensure that children with disabilities benefit.

### Governments should:

- **Establish** mechanisms and initiatives for cross-sectoral dialogue, coordination, and partnerships.
- **Ensure** that Education Sector Plans aim to transition to inclusive education and include children with disabilities, with a consistent budget allocated, by coordinating across the relevant sectors.

### Non-governmental organisations and civil society should:

- **Advocate** for a multi-sectoral approach to inclusive education.
- **Promote and implement** a multi-sectoral approach in projects and programmes on inclusive education, aiming at improving access to both mainstream and disability-specific services (in education, health, livelihood, protection and social welfare).

## Plan for fully connected service delivery

### Governments should:

- **Develop** strategies where a number of linked services (i.e. rehabilitation, health, social protection, social support, nutrition...) for children with disabilities can be provided at a single site, or at least sign-posted, for instance in schools.

- **Establish** and prioritise effective coordination mechanisms with and between local authorities and allocate adequate resources and support. This is a priority in countries where government is decentralised.

## Expand and strengthen the collection of disaggregated data on disability

### All stakeholders should:

- **Use** the “Washington Group Short Set of Questions” and the “Child Functioning Model” to collect data.
- **Disaggregate data**, in particular by disability, gender and age.

### Governments should:

- **Use** disability data, including within Educational Management Information Systems, to monitor progress and to better inform and adapt policies and actions, towards the realisation of SDG 4.

## Ensure meaningful participation of children, adults and families with disabilities

### Governments and donors should:

- **Actively involve** and consult persons with disabilities, parents, learners and educators, as well the organisations which represent them.
- **Develop** or strengthen participatory approaches and mechanisms for policy and programming in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- **Support** non-governmental organisations and civil society to advocate and deliver services around disability and inclusive education.

### Non-governmental organisations and civil society agencies should:

- **Play** a strong role in enabling the participation of persons with disabilities – as well as parents, learners and educators – in national and other level planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of inclusive education policies and programmes.

# Disability-inclusive education – an urgent call for renewed action

A world where inclusive education can flourish is also a world that can nurture inclusive societies. Inclusive learning environments see diversity as an asset and, accordingly, they work with the different needs, aspirations, choices and abilities of learners so that children can learn, grow and thrive together. Working towards this vision is critical for reducing the vast levels of inequality and discrimination currently faced by millions of children and adults across the globe. This is especially the case for the millions of children with disabilities, many of whom struggle to receive even the most basic of education.

Global progress in building inclusive education systems is now threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has severely disrupted the education of most children, and has seen limited funds diverted away from the education sector. Despite this setback, governments and the global community are now in a unique position to learn from the pandemic and renew efforts to improve education by re-imagining education systems.

Firstly, it is imperative that governments are held to account and supported to honour their commitments to children's education under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), and the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (UNCEDAW). Secondly, "building back better" requires approaches and strategies which catalyse the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's emphasis on the interdependency of rights and development targets, and the critical role of strong partnerships and inter-sectoral collaboration. The 2030 Agenda is both an urgent call for action as well as a blueprint for eliminating systemic inequality and barriers to education for all children.

Inclusive education systems can bring broad-ranging benefits which many current education systems cannot. Evidence shows that all children, regardless of ability, benefit significantly from inclusive education systems.<sup>(5)</sup> Additionally, we also know that inclusive education systems represent better value for money because they capitalise and



Grace attends a school supported by HI's inclusive education project in Kinshasa. Grace had to have her leg amputated because of an infection. After her amputation, the little girl received a prosthesis but she has not got used to it and prefers to use her crutch. It took a lot of time to persuade her parents to send their daughter back to school. The project has helped to improve the learning environment and to change community attitudes around children with disabilities attending school.  
© Johanna de Tessières/HI.

build on a range of resources and capacities across a number of sectors. This is especially relevant when considering the pressing need to address current downward trends in global development funding.

**Multi-sectoral education frameworks should form the basis of inclusive education reform.** Frameworks such as these are the best way to foster environments where the linkages and interdependencies between a range of rights and development targets are addressed. Importantly, **multi-sectoral approaches enable stronger collaborative partnerships and integrated service delivery between and by state and non-state actors.**

Lastly, inclusive education reform should be understood as a process of deep transformation – one which takes sustained commitment and support. For this reason, employing a twin-track approach for disability-inclusive education is also critical. This means that inclusive education systems should provide the specific supports to suit the learning needs of children with disabilities, whilst ensuring that education transitions to being fully inclusive for all.

## Humanity & Inclusion – working for disability-inclusive education worldwide

In addition to global evidence and learning, this report draws specifically on Humanity & Inclusion and its partners' extensive global experience and learning around education and disability. More recently, this includes the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education for children with disabilities.

Humanity & Inclusion has a long history of enabling children and young people with disabilities to fulfil their potential through quality education. All of Humanity & Inclusion's work is rights-based, and our goal is to see that all children with disabilities can enjoy their right to quality, inclusive education.

Humanity & Inclusion has embraced a child-centred approach to inclusive education, which is reflected in its six-year Social and Inclusion Technical Strategy (2020-2025). Our work strives to be centred on the needs and rights of individual children and young

people with disabilities and the communities in which they live. This means that we address both the specific child's needs and, at the same time, we tackle the environmental factors in the context where the child lives.

Humanity & Inclusion adopts a comprehensive approach throughout its work, resulting in smooth linkages between inclusive education and other areas of intervention. In fact, it is not possible to develop inclusive education systems without working with other sectors. Keeping the child's needs first and foremost, this particularly involves support in terms of strengthening the social service workforce, working with community-based social support services and case-management systems to adequately reach, identify, support and empower children and families at greater risk of being left behind.

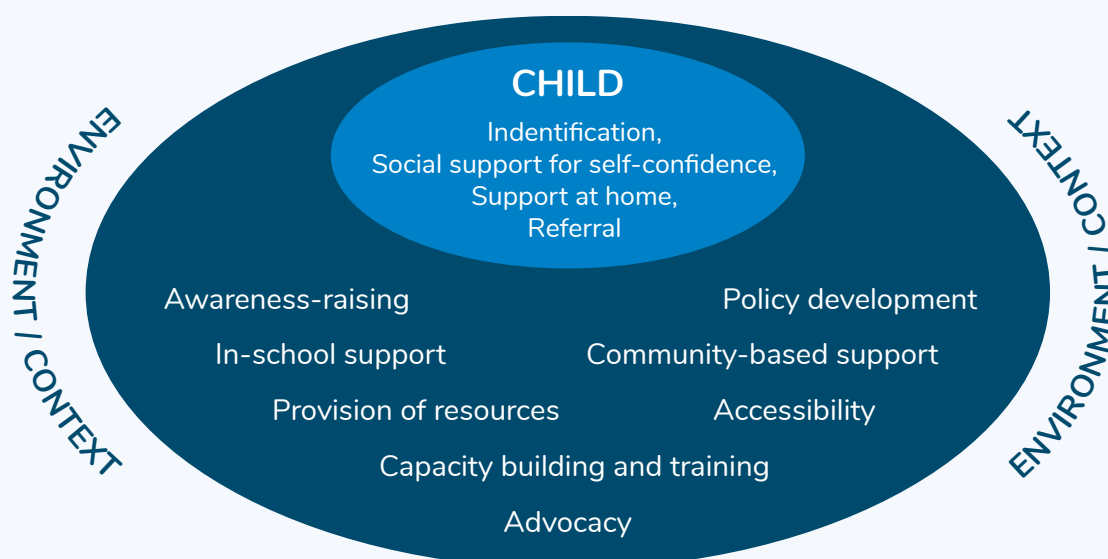


Figure 1: Levels of intervention in Humanity & Inclusion's work.  
Source: Handicap International (2012). "Inclusive Education Policy Paper."

Today, in partnership with governments, international agencies, organisations of persons with disabilities, non-governmental and civil society organisations, Humanity & Inclusion is implementing a total of 52 inclusive education programmes in 27 countries in three regions – sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, Middle East and North Africa. These programmes annually reach 127,000 children with disabilities and are life-changing for the children, families and communities who participate. Together with its partners, Humanity & Inclusion advocates at global, regional and national levels for

the right to quality, inclusive education. We strive for evidence-based advocacy, and we build upon our programme and policy experience.

At the global level, Humanity & Inclusion is an active member of a number of key networks such as the Global Campaign for Education and the International Development and Disability Consortium. In country, we partner with governments, civil society and non-governmental organisations, especially organisations of persons with disabilities, to advocate on disability and education.

# 1. Children with disabilities are still denied their rights

Everyone has a fundamental right to education. The right to quality, inclusive education is enshrined in several international frameworks, notably the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and targeted by Goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Yet, worldwide, education systems are still failing

children, especially those with disabilities, with many being denied their right to education. Of great concern, the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to reverse the progress which has been made in terms of inclusion of learners with disabilities or special needs. Renewed national commitment and actions alongside increased and sustained funding and resources should be a priority if we are to fulfil our education obligations and targets for children.

## Children with disabilities, especially girls, have unequal access to quality education

“Poor families will try to marry their daughters with disabilities as soon as possible in order to shift what they perceive is a burden of care. They are ready to give them to marry "for free", without the traditional dowry.”

(Focus group with Organisations of Persons With Disabilities, Maradi, Mali)<sup>(6)</sup>

In 2020, it was estimated that almost a quarter of a billion children worldwide were out of school.<sup>(7)</sup> Additionally, in 2013, it was reported that globally, one in twenty children under 14 years old had a disability<sup>(8)</sup> and that in 2015, some 50% of children with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries were excluded from education.<sup>(9)</sup> Furthermore, UNESCO’s Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) reported that across the globe, children with a sensory, physical or intellectual disability have lower enrolment rates compared to children without disabilities, and are two and half times more likely to have missed out on schooling altogether.<sup>(10)</sup>

To add to this, children with disabilities more often have poor levels of attendance and learning and

are more likely to drop out of school compared to their peers without disabilities. For instance, UNESCO found that children with disabilities from ten low- and middle-income countries were 19% less likely to achieve minimum proficiency in reading compared to those without disabilities.<sup>(11)</sup> As a result, many children with disabilities often fail to receive even the most basic of educations and do not progress to secondary and tertiary levels of education and training.

What is more, we also know that girls with disabilities are especially vulnerable and even less likely to access quality education than boys. For example, in 2013, UNICEF reported that only 42% of girls with disabilities completed primary school, compared to 51% of boys with disabilities.<sup>(12)</sup>

“I remember a bright girl who was blind, and she had to stop studying because her father fell ill. During one of our social surveys, we found her. Both her parents were begging and so was she. As soon as the children start begging, it's over. We can't get them back. We must raise their parent's awareness!”

(Director of the School 'Soli' for blind children and young people, Niamey, Niger)<sup>(13)</sup>

Despite some progress in recent years, the ongoing failure of many national education systems to provide quality, inclusive education to all children, especially children with disabilities, combined with the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic,

requires renewed and sustained commitment, effort and resources. Central to these efforts are those which prioritise a transformational approach to developing inclusive education strategies and which work across different sectors.

## Main barriers to quality, inclusive education for children with disabilities

**Stigma and discrimination:** Parents, peers, educators and communities often harbour negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities. This can lead to fear, shame, underestimating the capacities of children with disabilities and, ultimately, to their exclusion. This includes misperceptions that children with disabilities are unable to learn, that they are too vulnerable to attend school, or cannot learn alongside other children with different abilities.

**Schools with insufficient capacity and infrastructure:** This includes lack of educator preparation and support, non-adapted education curricula, inaccessible or inadequate teaching and learning materials, and inaccessible infrastructures in and around schools.

**Parallel or segregated education systems for children with disabilities:** Children with disabilities are often taught in a segregated learning environment such as a special school or centre. These types of settings can mean a child is isolated from the community, from other children, or from mainstream schools. Alternatively, children with disabilities may be taught in separate classes at a mainstream school for much or all of the time. In many countries, the special education system has no link to education ministries and may be under an entirely different ministry such as Social Welfare or Development. Humanity & Inclusion generally does not work in isolation with special schools. However, it does work with special schools to develop their capacity to act as a resource centre, and to support inclusive education in nearby mainstream schools.

**Unaffordable schooling:** In the case where schools with the capacity to support children with disabilities are not free, either because they are public but fee-paying, or private, many families cannot afford to enrol their children.

**Differing or unclear understandings of the concept of inclusion:** In some cases, inclusion is understood as simply placing children with disabilities in mainstream schools. However,

schools that are not prepared, supported or accountable for achieving inclusion may end up intensifying a child's experience of exclusion and even provoke a backlash against inclusive education reform.<sup>(14)</sup>

**Lack of adequate data:** In low- and middle-income countries in particular, there is a significant lack of disaggregated data on children and adults by disability including type and degree of disability; gender; age; geographic location and other exclusionary factors. This is a key barrier to reaching out to concerned children, understanding exclusion experiences, and providing inclusive education; and making effective policy and planning for persons with disabilities challenging.

**A lack of political will at the global, regional and national levels:** This includes inadequate funding on behalf of governments and donors for disability-inclusive education, leading to a decrease in quality, free, public schooling and an increase in fee-paying, private schools.<sup>(15)</sup> More generally this is due to the low prioritisation in the education agenda, and national policies which are not followed through despite global commitments to ensure children with disabilities' rights.<sup>(16)</sup>



Chelsia, 14, has a physical impairment since birth. Due to lack of resources, Chelsia was only enrolled in school at the age of 8, when she finally received a wheelchair. The journey to school is not easy for her, on a long, chaotic and rough road.

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## Defining different educational approaches for children with disabilities

**Segregation:** Children with disabilities receive an education in a segregated learning environment such as a special school or centre that is often isolated from the community, from other children, or from mainstream schools.

**Partial segregation:** The education system combines mainstreaming with separate settings. This means that some children with disabilities receive education in mainstreaming schools, while other children with disabilities – usually for those with severe disabilities – receive education in special schools.

**Integration:** Classes for children with disabilities are located within mainstream schools, or children with disabilities are placed into mainstream classes, but with minimal attempts to address specific learning or other critical needs. In other words, there is no attempt to support children's learning by modifying the curricula or teaching methods. In other forms of integration, children may be placed in a segregated classroom

alongside the mainstream school, but they are effectively learning in separate environments, as there are no attempts to encourage children to mix or learn together.

**Inclusion:** The education system caters for the needs of all children and is able to provide quality education to all children, who learn together. Mainstream schools maintain links to support services for children with special educational needs or disabilities. Humanity & Inclusion supports the recent Cali Commitment definition, namely, “a transformative process that ensures full participation and access to quality learning opportunities for all children, young people and adults, respecting and valuing diversity, and eliminating all forms of discrimination in and through education.”<sup>(17)</sup>

Adapted from: Handicap International. (2012). “Inclusive Education Policy Paper” and the 2019 Cali Commitment.

## A brief history of global commitments for inclusive education

The right to free, quality, and inclusive education for all has been established by a series of global legal and policy obligations and commitments which build upon the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and, in more recent times, the 2030 Agenda's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). A number of global summits and fora convening a range of critical and diverse stakeholders and decision-makers have also developed and set more specific commitments around inclusive education.

### 1979 – UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women

Article 10 of the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women affirms that States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure equal rights in the field

of education and contains a specific call to address female student drop-out.

### 1989 – UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Adopted in 1989, the UNCRC considers the “best interest of the child” to be the primary principle for any action taken concerning children. This includes actions taken in all areas of governance, justice and service provision. Article 28 of the Convention states that children and young people have the right to education regardless of race, gender or disability, while Article 29 ensures that a child's education should help their mind, body and talents be the best they can. The UNCRC is a binding international instrument which sets legal obligations for all States which have ratified it.

### 2006 – UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The UNCRPD was adopted in 2006 and places the principle of non-discrimination at its centre. Article 24 of this Convention calls on State Parties

to ensure inclusive education systems at all levels, and lifelong learning. It reemphasises the rights of girls, boys, women, and men with disabilities to education, life skills and social development, and identifies a number of areas for implementation. These include accessibility, accommodating diverse needs, and individual support. As with the UNCRC, the UNCRPD is a set of legally binding obligations.

### **2015 – Education 2030: Incheon Declaration**

Adopted at the 2015 World Education Forum in Incheon (Republic of Korea), this declaration defines a framework for action for the implementation of SDG 4. UN agencies and 160 countries committed to making the necessary changes in education policies and focusing efforts on the most disadvantaged, especially those with disabilities, to ensure that no one is left behind.

### **2015 – Oslo Declaration**

The Oslo Summit on Education builds on the Incheon Declaration and provides input into the adoption of the SDGs. The declaration issued at the end of the Oslo Summit underlines the need to review political priorities, mobilise more funding, use existing resources more effectively and transparently, establish new and innovative partnerships, and implement evidence-informed, inclusive and effective education policies.

### **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals**

The 17 SDGs adopted by all UN Member States in 2015 are a non-legally binding, but globally-shared commitments and a blueprint for global transformation. The SDGs support an agenda which seeks to prioritise and address the inequalities affecting vulnerable people, including children with disabilities, and to “leave no one behind.” This central principle identifies gender, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, language, migration and displacement status as aspects which can lead to marginalisation, discrimination or vulnerability. In the context of inclusive education and disability, the SDGs are considered an excellent opportunity to stimulate and make real progress. Of particular relevance to education, SDG 4 seeks to address the global learning crisis and commits to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”

### **2016 – General Comment on the Right to Inclusive Education**

In 2016, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities released General Comment No. 4 on the Right to Inclusive Education, which provides further non-binding clarification and guidance around Article 24 of the UNCRPD. The aim is to encourage and support governments to enhance efforts to move towards a more fundamental transformation of their education systems. Civil society groups and networks, including the International Disability and Development Consortium (IDDC), were closely involved in supporting the language around the general comment.

### **2018 – Global Disability Summit**

Inclusive education was one of the core topics of the first ever Global Disability Summit in 2018, co-hosted by the UK government with the International Disability Alliance and the Government of Kenya. Some 17 national governments committed to developing and implementing inclusive education sector policy and plans. Additionally, 12 national governments committed to expanding training on inclusive education, while 5 donors and multilateral organisations committed to endorsing or supporting the World Bank’s Inclusive Education Initiative (which was set up as a result of strong advocacy since 2015, from civil society organisations).

### **2019 – The Cali Commitment**

The Cali Commitment was the outcome of the 2019 International Forum on Inclusion and Equity in Education held in Cali (Colombia), which brought together over 450 education experts, trade unionists, politicians and government representatives from more than 55 countries. Humanity & Inclusion used the meeting as a platform to advocate strongly for a greater focus on children with disabilities. The Cali Commitment reaffirms prior commitments to inclusive education and the need to accelerate action, with an emphasis on working closely with civil society and marginalised groups.

## Stories of inclusion – Amie’s story: how an inclusive school enabled her to receive the personalised support she needs to learn, thrive and stay in school

Amie is an engaging and lively seven-year-old girl who loves going to her primary school with her friends. She lives in a small hut with no running water near Mano Junction, in a rural area of northern Sierra Leone. Amie was born with a physical disability and she has difficulty with coordination and strength in some of her limbs, for instance, it’s hard for her to hold a pen.

Amie’s school is one of the UK DFID-supported “Girls Education Challenge Transition” project model schools in Sierra Leone, under the global initiative Girls Education Challenge, of which Humanity & Inclusion is a consortium partner, with Plan International as lead. This initiative aims to help more girls enrol and stay in education by ensuring they transition from primary to secondary school. As part of the project, the school has become more inclusive and has been renovated to accommodate learners with disabilities by adding ramps, accessible toilets, wider doorways and larger windows, and brightly painted walls, which make classrooms and learning easier to access for learners with mobility challenges or low vision. Other activities have included raising awareness about disability in the community and with educators, as well as training itinerant teachers to support learners with disabilities alongside their schools, families and communities.

Amie has been allocated an itinerant teacher called Abdul. Abdul visits Amie at school twice a month and also pays weekly home visits to check how she is getting on at home. This includes organising regular community meetings to ensure that Amie’s parents, teachers and other community members close to Amie can come together to discuss her needs and progress. This meeting is an opportunity for everyone involved in supporting Amie to consider how they can work together more effectively.

Abdul also works with Amie’s teacher and her parents to develop an individual education plan. During the weekly home meeting they discuss how the plan is working and any modifications they might need to make. As a result of this support, Amie is making good progress with her reading and writing and she is also much more confident of her abilities. Additionally, the community meetings have helped her parents, educators and the community understand more about her disability and how they can support her. Most importantly, her parents are very pleased with her progress and are more committed to helping her stay in school.

## 2. Inclusive education systems will ensure that every child can access quality education and thrive

We cannot afford to leave another generation of children behind. The exclusion of children from quality, inclusive education impacts negatively on their lives, their futures and also on societies and national development. Inclusive education pedagogy has been shown to improve the quality of teaching and learning for all children, not just those with disabilities. It is also an approach that

values diversity and promotes human development and cohesive societies. Inclusive education is the **only** strategy which can reimagine the currently inadequate education systems, and ensure that **all** children, including those with disabilities, can access quality education in an inclusive environment, free from segregation and discrimination.





Figure 2. The positive effects of inclusive education.

## Stories of inclusion – Making schools and extracurricular activities more welcoming and safer for children with disabilities.

The Vista project on Inclusive Education in Mozambique has run from 2017 to 2020, offering future prospects to children with disabilities in Mozambique through inclusive education in targeted peri-urban areas of Maputo and Matola. The multi-sectoral approach is a core part of this project, for example linking social protection to inclusive education. The Inclusive Education project established a robust referral system linking to rehabilitation and assistive devices' providers, in coordination with the Humanity & Inclusion's Social Protection project, thus supporting the children to access the devices and services they need.

There is also a multi-sectoral focus connecting education and child protection, in collaboration with the child protection services. Teachers have been trained on child protection concepts, positive discipline techniques, signs for the identification

of violence against children by teachers or other adults, mechanisms of report, and on the referral process. A child protection mechanism was set up in the pilot schools, children in the schools were made aware of how to use the anonymous complaints boxes, and there was specific follow up at community level for individual cases of concern, where appropriate.

Other staff working with children were included in these trainings, including personnel in charge of extracurricular activities such as sports, arts, dance, singing and other "non-academic" activities, which are all vital to a child's wellbeing and holistic development.. Extending training to adults interacting with children, both in and out of the classroom, is an important aspect of inclusive education approaches in practice, according to HI.

"As a physical education teacher, I see changes. I have a student with a physical disability and I excluded her because I thought she could not participate in sports activities, but after this training I've started to include her in all my classes."

## Achieving national inclusive education systems is a process of sustained transformation requiring a twin-track approach, working across sectors

Humanity & Inclusion agrees with definition of inclusive education stated in the Cali Commitment, namely that it is, “a transformative process that ensures full participation and access to quality learning opportunities for all children, young people and adults, respecting and valuing diversity, and eliminating all forms of discrimination in and through education.”<sup>(18)</sup> Humanity & Inclusion seeks to ensure that children and young people with disabilities and special learning are included in this definition. In this way, Humanity & Inclusion understands inclusive education to be a system which seeks to increase participation and reduce exclusion, and which values diversity and promotes human development. This is based upon the development of enabling learning environments where all children can fulfil their potential.

In order to achieve this, inclusive education systems need to take into account the teaching and learning needs of all learners, including acknowledging that some children with disabilities, or with special learning needs, may need specific support to access to and thrive in education on an equal level with other children.

In practice, rebuilding education systems and ongoing reform efforts require that governments and donors adopt a twin-track approach when moving towards inclusive education systems, whereby the individual needs of children with disabilities are addressed at the same time as addressing societal, environmental, economic, and political barriers to education. A twin-track approach also implies allocating general funding to foster an inclusive learning environment for all learners, as well as targeted funding to follow the furthest behind as early as possible.”<sup>(19)</sup>

Moving towards inclusive education is a particularly relevant and poignant message for those countries now reassessing and rebuilding their school systems in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this health crisis, where up to 90% of children and young people around the world have experienced disruption to their education,<sup>(20)</sup> learners with disabilities have seen their right to education particularly affected. Innovative approaches in support of education

and training continuity have been put in place, but their quality and accessibility has not always been ensured. Not only has distance learning often been inaccessible for children with disabilities, but many of these children have also been cut off from other important services such as health, nutrition, psychosocial support and protection – all services which are often accessed through schools. In this situation, it is clear that a “business as usual” approach is inadequate, and that increasing collaboration across sectors is the only way forward.

Combined effects of improved teaching methods, provision of learning material, and remedial help for those who fall behind, can potentially improve learning outcomes by 25% to 53% in inclusive education settings.<sup>(21)</sup> Additionally, inclusive education systems can also help reduce disability-related stigma among educators, other learners, and their families by including all children, regardless of ability or background, in mainstream schools. This allows different children from different abilities and backgrounds to socialise, build relationships and learn to accept and appreciate difference.

Inclusive education strategies are particularly effective because they move away from a “one-size-fits-all” model towards a more tailored approach which identifies and responds to the needs of each child, but without using negative or stigmatising labels. Central to this, is the need to strengthen the capacity of the whole education system, including that of educators, to be able to meet the diverse needs of various learners.<sup>(22)</sup>

Very importantly, inclusive education strategies represent an opportunity to reimagine education systems which can accommodate diversity and have positive impacts for every learner. This helps lay the foundations of a more cohesive and equitable society – one where all members are considered important contributors.<sup>(23)</sup>

### 3. Inclusive education system reform must be accelerated to reach 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals

“Government only allocates limited resources each year so we have to plan around this. We had to construct a new building due to the lack of classrooms in our school so we invested our resources there. Then last year, we installed frames for the doors. Hopefully, next year we will ensure safety measures by putting in railings and other construction activities.”

(Head teacher, Sarlahi, Nepal)<sup>(24)</sup>

Greater commitments need to be made to support effective national implementation of international frameworks relating to inclusive education. So far, voluntary reporting under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as well as mandatory country reporting to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities have pointed to some global progress, albeit slow, and significant gaps and challenges.

In 2017, out of 43 voluntary national reviews of SDG 4, some 39 countries did mention the principle of inclusive education, but only 19 countries referred to any explicit national strategies, with none mentioning how it was reaching the most excluded.<sup>(25)</sup>

More encouragingly, some promising progress was shown in the 2018 stocktake report by the Global Partnership for Education which analysed the Education Sector Plans of the 51 low- and middle-income countries receiving its support. The study found that almost half (47%) of these sector plans

included strategies to improve education access, while a large number (37%) were starting to include disability and inclusive education strategies in sector planning. However, some 15% of the countries did not mention children with disabilities at all, and overall, there were very low number of countries (9) which included a specific focus area on children with disabilities within their inclusive education policies.<sup>(26)</sup> This is a shocking statistic and one that needs urgent measures to tackle.

Immediate and additional efforts need to be made to accelerate and sustain more rapid global progress towards achieving inclusive education for all as set out by SDG 4 targets. The uneven progress achieved so far has experienced additional setbacks as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This urgently requires that stakeholders at all levels galvanise their commitment and political will towards fulfilling all children’s rights, including those with disabilities, to inclusive, quality education.

### Turning policy commitments into enforced rights and practices

When looking at countries’ legal reform in relation to inclusive education, UNESCO’s 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report revealed that worldwide there is still some way to go in terms of moving from legislation which emphasises segregation towards inclusion-focused legislation.

The report found greater evidence of progress in how national policy frameworks – as opposed to legal frameworks – reflected inclusion. Interestingly, some regional trends were also identified, with more than 40% of countries in the regions of Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean still leaning towards segregated education systems based on outdated legislation and policy.

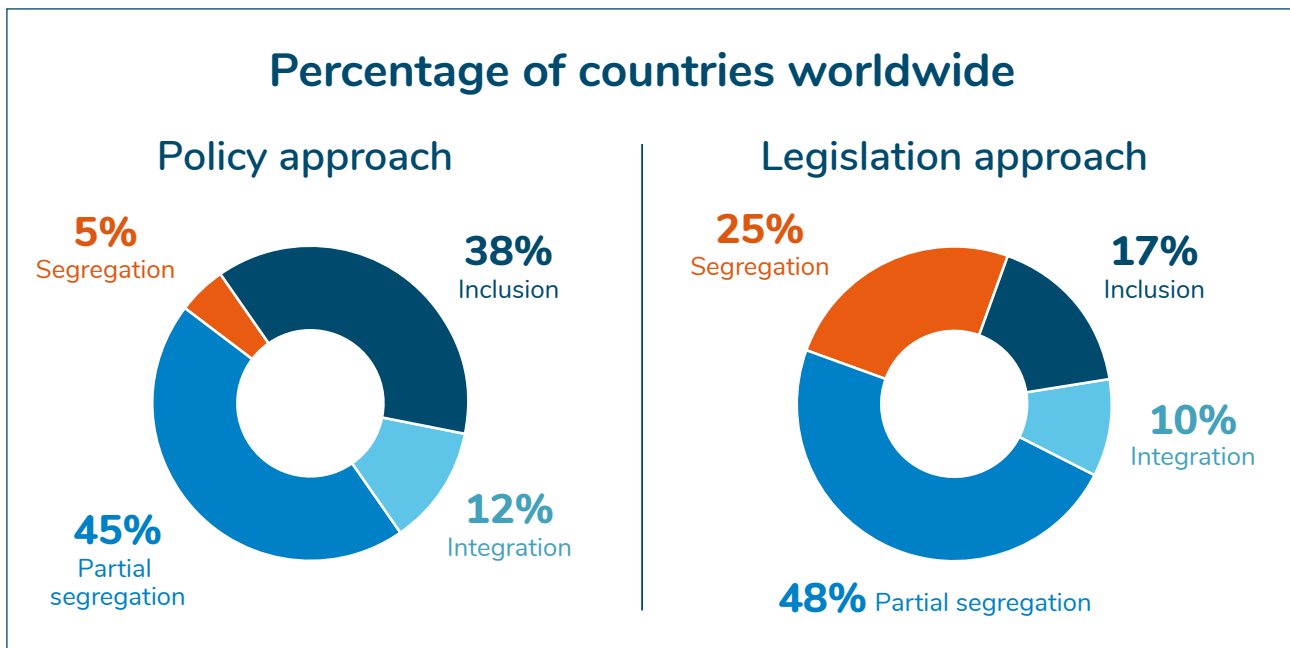


Table 1. Comparison of policy and legislation approaches in education for children with disabilities. Source: UNESCO (2020). “Inclusion and education: All means all - Global Education Monitoring Report.”

The report also reviewed 85 mandatory country reports submitted to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on the implementation of inclusive education programmes and services. A common theme was identified – the noticeable disconnect and inconsistencies between many countries’ national legal and policy frameworks and national programmes and implementation.<sup>(27)</sup>

For example, in cases where countries have worked to put national legislation in place and develop or align appropriate policy frameworks, a lack of coordination across different sectors often caused

gaps between legislation and policy, and the development and implementation of programme strategies. Additionally, follow up actions required to implement legal and policy frameworks were not adequately supported, resourced or funded, or negative attitudes and pushbacks were experienced at various levels against inclusive education strategies. These specific issues can make it difficult for countries to develop and implement effective national programmes, despite having robust legal and policy frameworks in place.<sup>(28)</sup>

## The Global Partnership for Education: how a global coalition is supporting education reform by increasing levels of commitment and pooling resources and expertise

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) is an education-focused global and multilateral coalition that mobilises global and national investments for education. The partnership is made up of more than 70 low- and middle-income country governments and 20 multilateral and donor nations, as well as philanthropic foundations, the private sector, international agencies, civil society, non-governmental organisations and educator groups.

The GPE’s Strategic Plan (2016-2020)<sup>(29)</sup> aims to increase equity, gender equality and inclusion by targeting learners who are the most marginalised because of gender, disability, ethnicity, conflict or fragility. Since June 2019, the GPE has allocated more than US\$379 million in the form of grants to activities which help address factors of exclusion and marginalisation in education.<sup>(30)</sup>

Central to the GPE approach is the recognition that actively engaging civil society and other non-state

actors is vital in helping create and maintain the political will needed to adopt strong education policies, sound practices and inclusive approaches. Additionally, the GPE secretariat recognised that linking national education and development plans is critical in order to affect much needed cross-sectoral reforms which can address multiple and sometimes complex education barriers. That said, the GPE has only recently started to explore opportunities to collaborate with stakeholders outside of the education sector, which has so far focused on health sector collaboration around nutrition and the provision of assistive devices.<sup>(31)(32)</sup>

It is hoped that the COVID-19 pandemic will provide much needed additional momentum in the adoption of multi-sectoral approaches in the implementation of the upcoming GPE Strategic Plan, starting 2021. Lessons learnt on multi-sector collaboration during the pandemic should enable additional or more effective linkages with other key sectors such as social welfare and protection, sports and leisure, rehabilitation, child protection, nutrition and others, while maintaining and reinforcing GPE's existing multi-partnership and multi-level approach.

## 4. COVID-19: Opportunity in crisis - let's improve education systems

### Multiple challenges for children with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic affect their education

**Alternative learning strategies can exclude some children** – Where schools are closed, alternative arrangements are often made to provide distance learning. This includes learning online, or via radio, television or mobile phones. It is important that the needs of children with disabilities are taken into account when developing these kinds of strategies. For example, when using audio-based remote learning strategies, children who are hard of hearing or Deaf should be able to access the same materials in written form. If the learning strategy is video-based, there should be options to follow in sign language. Where there are children with intellectual disabilities, they should be provided with learning content that is relevant to them, and there should be a plan in place to support them.<sup>(33)</sup>

**Ensuring proper hygiene for prevention and control of disease is critical** – Where schools are open, it is essential to ensure that messages around COVID-19 safety effectively reach children, educators and parents, and that schools are provided with essential supplies, such as disinfectant, soap and water. Some children with disabilities may face barriers to following basic hygiene guidelines such as handwashing, if, for instance, WASH facilities are physically

inaccessible, or if a person has physical difficulties carrying out actions such as handwashing. In other instances, assistive products such as wheelchairs, white canes, walkers, and transfer boards need to be properly disinfected as they are handled and used in public spaces.<sup>(34)</sup> Health and hygiene messages also need to be communicated in an inclusive and accessible way so that everyone can receive vital COVID-19 messages and guidance.

**Health systems are often weakened during disease outbreaks** – Some children with disabilities have chronic health conditions that may require ongoing management and rehabilitation, and which may also put them at greater risk of infection. Educators, community health workers and social workers should play a key role in identifying early symptoms of infection and referring children to health services. However, one impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on health systems is the reduced capacity or even the complete unavailability of important health services for children with disabilities, such as rehabilitation. Pre-existing or new health-related conditions can mean that children with disabilities find it even more difficult to continue their learning at home whilst schools are closed.<sup>(35)</sup>

**Mental health and psychosocial support is a key consideration** – School closures also lead to disruptions in children’s and families’ daily routines. This can be particularly difficult for children with some disabilities, such as those with Autism Spectrum Disorders, who may rely heavily on the need for routines. This also puts additional pressure on their families and caregivers, who may require greater levels of support from service providers. Moreover, many children and young people have already experienced, or might worry about, the death or illness of a parent, caregiver, family member or friend from COVID-19, resulting in emotional distress.<sup>(36)</sup>

**Household incomes are negatively affected** – Girls and boys with disabilities often live in relatively poorer families and already experience relatively more barriers to accessing education because of this.<sup>(37)</sup> Where households are already struggling to generate sufficient income, the

COVID-19 pandemic continues to negatively impact on household incomes and children with disabilities’ access to school.<sup>(38)</sup> Increased financial hardship may lead to many children with disabilities dropping out of school or not returning when they reopen.

**Strategies for protection from violence and abuse must be strengthened** – Even before the pandemic swept across the globe, children with disabilities were four times as likely to experience violence as those without disabilities.<sup>(39)</sup> Lockdown and quarantine strategies which have included closing schools and restricting movement have placed new stressors on parents and caregivers, which in part is exposing children to greater risks of violence and abuse.<sup>(40)</sup> Reduced household incomes and greater economic instability may also put girls and boys at higher risk of sexual exploitation. Finally, protective services, which are offered through schools, are likely to be disrupted or more difficult to access.

The COVID-19 pandemic’s global impact is unprecedented and has exacerbated the already significant challenges for many children in accessing quality, inclusive education. UNESCO estimated that up to 90% of all children and young people globally experienced disruption to their education. Even now, nine months into the pandemic in October 2020, at least 34 countries still have complete school closures, which is 33% of the student population.<sup>(41)</sup> However, the crisis also represents an opportunity to address weak and exclusionary education systems by building on renewed political will, and by strengthening inclusive, multi-sectoral strategies. This should include strategies that not only address the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic, but also build resilience to future disease outbreaks and other shocks.

The COVID-19 pandemic has both highlighted and added to existing systemic inequalities for education systems, communities and learners, including children with disabilities, on a hitherto unknown scale and speed.<sup>(42)</sup> Children with disabilities have experienced increased exclusion, marginalisation, poverty and vulnerability as a result of the pandemic. For school-going children with disabilities, this has included reduced access to learning both during and potentially after the pandemic. Of note, girls with and without disabilities have been particularly affected by the

crisis and are at the greatest risk of dropping out of school permanently.<sup>(43)</sup>

Innovative approaches to ensure that children and young people can continue their education or training during the pandemic have been put in place, such as distance learning. However, strategies of this kind are not always accessible to all and can also vary in terms of the quality of the learning they provide. Critically, distance learning is often hard to access for many children with disabilities, with the added challenge that other important services normally accessed through the school such as health, nutrition, psychosocial support or protection may also be lost.<sup>(44)</sup>

In one example, the temporary learning centres in Rohingya refugee camps in Cox’s Bazaar, Bangladesh, were closed in response to the pandemic. This led to many children losing out on the daily meal provided by these centres. Elsewhere, this problem has been addressed through the creation of takeaway school meal systems, while cash transfers or voucher systems have also been investigated as a way of allowing families to purchase food normally provided by schools.<sup>(45)</sup>

Additionally, new needs in relation to children’s access to and quality of education, healthcare, and protection have also arisen as direct result

of the pandemic. These include the risk of children and their families becoming sick or dying from COVID-19, additional mental health and psychosocial support needs, and a lack of access to communications for distance learning.<sup>(46)</sup>

As governments and global education actors start to focus on learning from the COVID-19 pandemic and incorporating this learning into education planning, there is an opportunity to reimagine

existing education systems. This means building strategies that reduce inequity and inequality and create better learning opportunities for all children, especially for those who were already previously excluded or at risk of exclusion.<sup>(47)</sup> Achieving this requires a comprehensive approach, with a shift to multi-sectoral strategies, where the full spectrum of the learner's needs is taken into consideration and systemic barriers are eliminated.

## What have we learned from COVID-19 and previous disease outbreaks and crises?

We already know that humanitarian crises of any type or length can profoundly impact the wellbeing of children and young people, including their mental health; that such crises can disrupt family and community cohesion; and that they may increase the risk for children to be exposed to harm from child labour, violence and/or exploitation. The complexity and interdependency of children's care, safety, wellbeing and education in times of crisis requires the adoption or strengthening of coordinated multi-sectoral approaches that incorporate inclusive education strategies.

Humanity & Inclusion has learned from its own programmes that the education response during the COVID-19 pandemic, as in other crisis context, needs to be comprehensive and multi-sectoral. Education strategies during this time need to link very closely to livelihoods; health and

rehabilitation; social welfare; protection; mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS); and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) strategies, and vice versa. Also, that children with disabilities' access to education during the COVID-19 requires specific interventions.

Multi-sectoral strategies are therefore critical in the response to a health crisis and additional social welfare and protection mechanisms need to be built into emergency provisions and plans for education. Effective collaboration and coordination across diverse ministries will ensure that education sector resources are not drained by expenditures that could be carried by other sectors (such as health, welfare, social justice and empowerment, telecoms) and which could compromise the quality and accessibility of education.<sup>(48)</sup>

## Country study - Nepal: how the country is tackling education reform in the context of earthquake and COVID-19 recovery

“We expect that education will be a priority sector in the upcoming budget given the COVID-19 pandemic. It will look at the means to coordinate between all levels of government and stakeholders in order to guide the safe reopening of schools.”

Dr. Sanjay Sharma, Secretary, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology.<sup>(49)</sup>

In 2015, Nepal was devastated by an earthquake. In some of the worst hit areas, 90% of the schools were destroyed, with an estimated one million children out of school in the direct aftermath.<sup>(50)</sup>

This has been further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nepal undertook a budget review mission of the School Sector Development Programme in May 2020 which identified

increased dropout rates, interruptions in learning and greater inequality as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>(51)</sup> This threatens to reverse the progress made so far to improve access to and quality of education in Nepal.

To add to these challenges, in 2020, it was estimated that more than 105,000 of the estimated 179,000 children with disabilities in Nepal are out of school.<sup>(52)</sup> However, Humanity & Inclusion independently estimated that this number is very likely to be much higher if data was to reflect a functional approach to disability, for instance, by including difficulties such as dyslexia and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, as well as milder functional difficulties in learning, mobility or sensory domains.

Nepal has a long-term vision of an inclusive education system but it is still going through a process recovery, economic development and policy reform whereby a number of coexisting education systems are in place for children with disabilities. These include special schools, integrated classes, and a limited number of children in mainstream schools, most likely children with milder and hidden disabilities.

In the context of Nepal, the sectors of education and disaster risk management are critically linked. Nepal's seven-year School Sector Development Plan (2016/17–2022/23)<sup>(53)</sup> strongly reflects the need for post-earthquake reconstruction as well as the national goal of graduating from least developed country status by 2022. With this in mind, the national education plan includes ensuring that all learners can access safe and enabling learning environments through the mainstreaming of comprehensive school safety and disaster risk reduction strategies, such as earthquake-proof schools and resilient communities.

The Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sector is another extremely important sector for Nepal's ongoing education reconstruction and reforms. The government's investment in WASH facilities and awareness raising in schools has led to around 80% of all primary schools having access to adequate water and sanitation facilities. This is critical for improved health, including protection against disease including COVID-19, and for improved dignity, learning and gender equality, as it can significantly contribute to reducing dropout rates of adolescent girls and learners with disabilities.

## 5. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides urgent impetus for prioritising multi-sectoral, inclusive education strategies

The Sustainable Development Goals are part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is designed to address a multiplicity of key structural inequalities preventing many people across the globe from realising their rights. A central feature of the SDGs is the acknowledgment that targets cannot be met unless they are addressed in a comprehensive fashion, which entails understanding the

interdependency of structural inequalities and developing coordinated strategies which work across the different economic, social and environmental sectors. In this way, the SDGs should be considered more than just development targets, but also as a blueprint for action for multi-sectoral responses and strategies. The time is now to make the changes needed to keep the SDGs on track.



# Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality, inclusive education, supporting children with disabilities

Sustainable Development Goal 4 provides the framework to education and disability sector actors on all levels to identify and address structural barriers to education. This includes developing more effective strategies which work with diverse sectors and stakeholders.<sup>(54)</sup>

Disability is specifically mentioned in SDG 4 target 4.5, which requires ensuring equal access for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities. It is also mentioned in target 4.A, which requires education to be disability sensitive and learning environments to be safe, non-violent, and inclusive for all.

While SDG 4 is the bedrock of efforts to build effective inclusive education systems by 2030, a number of linkages and dynamics between SDG 4

and other SDGs have been identified as critical to success. Likewise, it will not be possible for other SDGs to meet their 2030 targets without working in a number of ways with the education sector.

The graphic below illustrates how SDG4 has strong and evident interconnections with a set of other SDGs: the realisation of these SDGs directly enables the realisation of SDG4 and the other way round. However, as inclusive quality education allows all individuals to fulfil their potential by increasing skills and knowledge, promoting social interactions, and fostering active citizenship, we can assert that the impact of inclusive education encompasses the entire spectrum of 17 SDGs.

See Annex 1: “Looking beyond SDG 4 - inclusive education and the Sustainable Development Goals” at the end of this report.

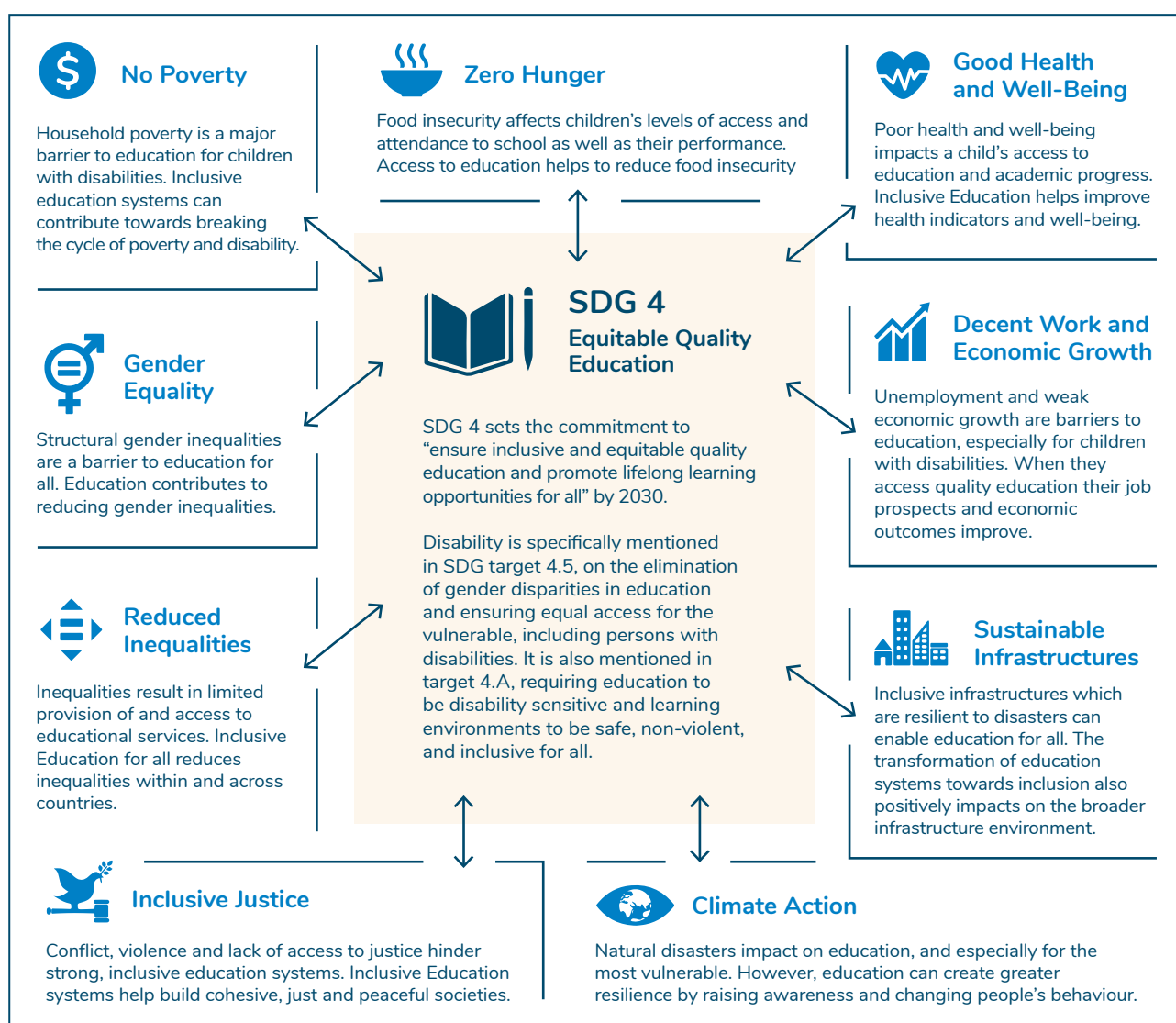


Figure 3. SDG 4 and its interactions with 9 selected SDGs.

## 6. Strengthening multi-sectoral education frameworks - a universal priority

Inclusive education systems are built on collaborative and coordinated frameworks and strategies that work across various sectors with a range of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. This requires moving away from what is commonly called a “silo” approach, where government ministries and other stakeholders plan and implement policy and programmes with limited inter-sectoral coordination. By adopting a multi-sectoral approach, complex education needs and dynamics can be more comprehensively addressed by taking into account diverse socio-economic factors.

Support within the international cooperation sector for multi-sectoral approaches has been bolstered by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’s emphasis on interconnections, partnerships, and shared responsibilities. While multi-sectoral education frameworks are slowly emerging across the globe, they should be further prioritised, requiring additional and sustained support in order to render them fully effective.

Importantly, we know that education indicators and outcomes correlate with health poverty and social exclusion indicators. By health, we are also referring to rehabilitation needs, and mental health needs, in addition to medical support. For this reason, inclusive, quality education is unlikely to be achievable unless we break away from entrenched, single-sector focused approaches.<sup>(55)</sup> Transformation towards disability-inclusive education systems requires leadership from an empowered ministry of education that is systematically collaborating with other relevant ministerial departments and sectors on various levels.

Just as the involvement of the rehabilitation sector is crucial, so is the involvement of the social support sector. Inclusive social policies and services (eg. social protection policies, social worker services) impact on the wellbeing and inclusion of individuals and communities, protect people against poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion throughout their lives, and can empower them to succeed.

### What is a multi-sectoral approach and how is it important for child rights and inclusive education?

A multi-sectoral approach refers to collaborative and coordinated policy, planning, implementation and monitoring between a number of different sectors and stakeholders around a shared set of policy outcomes. Typically, this includes diverse government ministries and agencies, alongside civil society, non-governmental organisations and the private sector.<sup>(56)</sup> A critical requirement of effective multi-sectoral approaches is that roles, responsibilities and coordination mechanisms are clearly delineated and supported.<sup>(57)</sup>

The interlinked, indivisible, and interdependent nature of all human rights is more effectively translated into comprehensive strategies when multi-sectoral approaches are used. For instance, the right to education for all children is based on the child rights principles of non-discrimination and

the best interests of the child, but also depends on fulfilling children’s right to protection from violence and abuse, to health, to personal mobility, and to rehabilitation. Likewise, fulfilling the right to education can have a positive impact on other rights, such as the right to participation in public life, to adequate standards of living, and to decent employment.<sup>(58)</sup> The interdependent nature of rights and of global development goals underpins the 2030 Agenda.

Multi-sectoral approaches are therefore constructed around paradigms which build upon the interconnectedness of rights and development targets. This is equally relevant for inclusive education reform – the specifics of which are clearly articulated and further developed by this report.

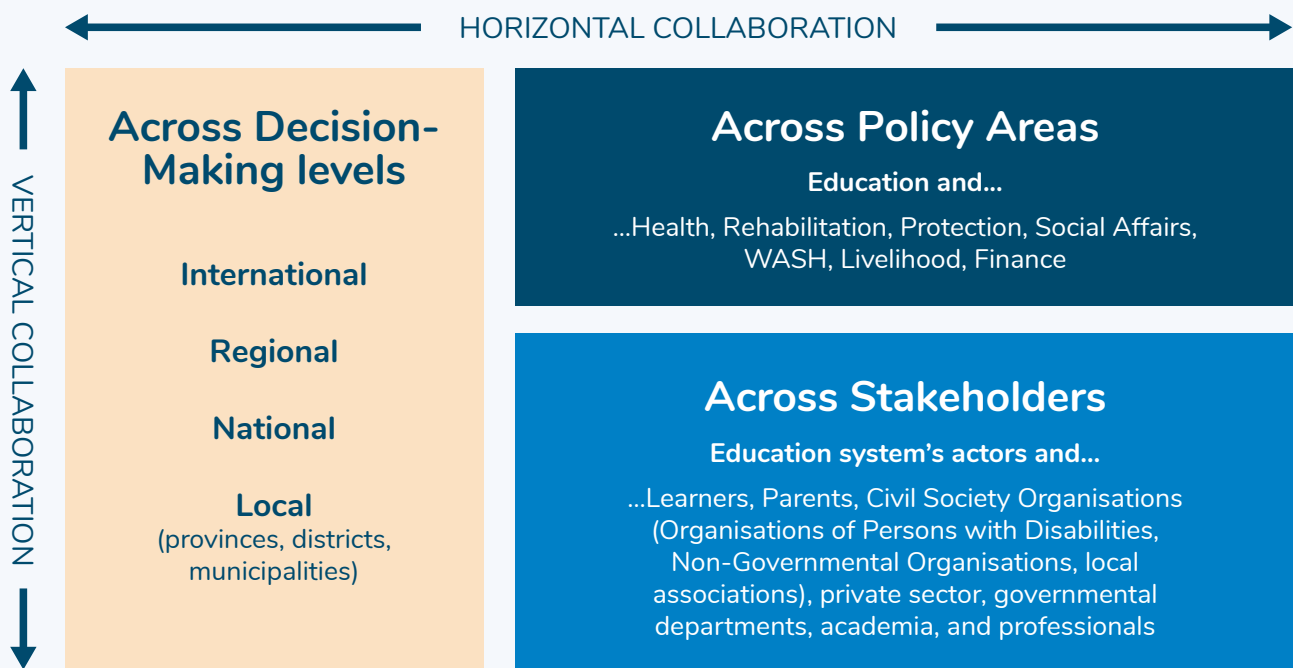


Figure 4. Vertical and horizontal collaboration between sectors and levels for multi sectoral, inclusive education. Adapted from: UNESCO (2020). “Inclusion and education: All means all - Global Education Monitoring Report.”

## Inclusive education for children with disabilities should be the responsibility of education ministries, but collaboration across sectors is pivotal

In order to achieve fully inclusive education systems for children with disabilities, education ministries should be responsible for driving the process, but this must be undertaken in a collaborative way with other ministries and stakeholders.

In some countries, the education of persons with disabilities is part of portfolios for health, social development or welfare, as opposed to education. When governments organise their ministries in this way, it creates challenges when seeking to build effective, disability-inclusive education systems.<sup>(59)</sup>

In other countries, the education for persons with disabilities is already the responsibility of the education ministry, but ministries and service delivery mechanisms are structured in a siloed manner that does not enable cross-sectorial cooperation. This can present further challenges in ensuring disability-inclusive education at the implementation level. For instance, coordination may be weak or resources are used inefficiently.

There may also be a lack of clarity in terms of the roles and responsibility of other ministries and sectors and how they should be supporting a disability-inclusive education plan.<sup>(60)</sup>

As an example, the Global Partnership for Education’s 2018 stocktake review documented how a number of countries (Kyrgyzstan, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan) considered lack of inter-ministerial coordination as a key barrier to planning and implementing effective disability-inclusive education programmes.<sup>(61)</sup>

Finally, multi-sectoral frameworks alone cannot guarantee effective coordination and collaboration different government agencies. Where there is shared administrative and implementation responsibility, for instance between two ministries and their decentralised authorities, strong and supported coordination mechanisms under an empowered education ministry are critical.<sup>(62)</sup>



As part of the 'Girls Education Challenge-Transition' project consortium led by Plan International, and in collaboration with the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, Humanity & Inclusion is using the consolidated community-based rehabilitation approach to identify and assist children with disabilities to access and stay in school, receive support services and change prevailing attitudes with regards to children with disabilities.

Community-based rehabilitation volunteers hold monthly sessions in order to raise community awareness and promote the rights of children with disabilities through dialogue. They also organise home visits to ensure ongoing support for families with children with disabilities, as well as linking families with service providers for health, education, community development and

social welfare. These volunteers play a critical role in helping communities build stronger support structures for children and families with disabilities, as well as enabling community dialogue and promoting greater inclusion by encouraging school enrolment and links between home and school.

This has been achieved by working with a broad range of groups including disability organisations, schools, educators, education para-professionals, school authorities, parents, school supervisors, district and chiefdom education authorities, and regional rehabilitation centres and disability networks. In addition, itinerant specialist teachers have also been trained to work alongside mainstream teachers and individual children who have been identified as having specific support needs.

## Innovative multi-sectoral strategies are emerging in diverse contexts

Multi-sectoral planning and programming is still a relatively new approach for the education sector. However, we can already draw some important lessons from countries that have taken initial steps to move towards multi-sectoral approaches for inclusive education. For many, these steps might only be recent attempts to establish a level of collaboration between some key ministries or sectors. So far, common strategic linkages are often found between education and community awareness of disability and inclusion; accessibility of buildings; and health and nutrition. However, there are also examples of countries which have put relatively more robust and far-reaching multi-sectoral frameworks in place, and where a number of diverse ministries and sectors are actively planning and implementing around a more comprehensive and coordinated strategy.<sup>(63)</sup>

For example, the Global Partnership for Education's 2018 stocktake report looked at 51 countries, and found that seven countries (Cambodia, Ghana, People's Republic of Laos, Kyrgyz Republic,

Nepal, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan) mentioned or were implementing multi-sectoral approaches. These included bridging disability-responsive Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes and health projects, collaborating across sectors for disaggregated data collection, and establishing directorates for special education within education ministries.<sup>(64)</sup>

In another example, Ghana developed a five-year Inclusive Education Policy Implementation Plan (2015–2019) which led to the establishment of an inter-ministerial committee between the Ministries of Health; Gender, Children and Social Protection; Local Government and Rural Development; and Transport.<sup>(65)</sup> Meanwhile, Tajikistan's government has planned to work with stakeholders beyond the government sector, including mobilising the resources of local and state authorities, business, non-governmental organisations and parents, with a view to expanding the reach of supplementary education and rehabilitation services.<sup>(66)</sup>

## Country study – Rwanda: how the country is reforming its national education system towards a multi-sectoral, inclusive education framework

Based on data included by the Rwanda's Ministry of Education in its policy paper on special needs and inclusive education (2018),<sup>(67)</sup> a mere 0.75% of the children attending Rwanda's primary schools have a disability. This attendance rate is noticeably less than the rate of primary school-aged children with disabilities to be found in Rwanda's national population. In response to this, Rwanda is committed to reforming its education system to one which is more inclusive, with a view to getting more children with disabilities into school. The country has made excellent strides with respect to inclusive education policy and practice in recent years despite the low numbers still in school.

One key element of Rwanda's recent education policy reform is to use a twin-track approach by supporting local schools to include learners with disabilities, while at the same time ensuring that specialised resources and services are also available to empower these children in inclusive education settings.

Additionally, there is a strong focus on working civil society and non-governmental organisations,<sup>(68)</sup> both in terms of policymaking and for service delivery. For instance, a national technical working group for special needs and inclusive education has been created to bring together expertise and representation of key stakeholders, including Humanity & Inclusion as a co-chair. The technical working group includes education experts, persons with disabilities, civil society organisations and community representatives who, together, have a mandate to advise, support and link national strategies and planning with community-based initiatives and organisations.<sup>(69)</sup>

Rwanda's inclusive education policy also places much emphasis on its cross-cutting nature, and the need to support a coordinated, multi-sectoral response. Rwanda also recently shifted to a competence based curriculum, and reviewed all subjects through an inclusive lens, in addition to producing specific guidelines to support teachers in terms of implementing inclusive education approaches in schools.



A 12 year old boy who has a physical disability and who is a wheelchair user, is enjoying a lesson in a classroom in Rwanda (in Rotsiro), and has been asked to come to the front of the class to share his answer. His classmates are watching him and smiling. © Julia McGeown/HI.

With this understanding, a range of education initiatives are planned with the support of other government sectors. For instance, the Ministry of Education revamped the school feeding programme through collaboration around school food gardens, supported by the Ministry of Agriculture, alongside local development partners and district authorities. In another example, the Ministry of Health is supporting healthy lifestyles for children at school and at home by building accessible playgrounds, and by offering guidance and counselling services, and life skills development programmes.

Notably, Rwanda has put in place a number of coordination mechanisms, both formal and informal, to support its education policy reform priorities. In the first instance, Rwanda's 2018 revised national policy for special needs and inclusive education<sup>(70)</sup> outlines the roles and responsibilities of a range of stakeholders, with regulations in place to ensure that, where mandated, they will allocate adequate resources to special needs and inclusive education services.

## Country study – Morocco: how the country is moving gradually towards a more multi-sectoral, decentralised vision of inclusive education

Morocco is an example of a country where efforts are being made towards an inclusive education system. Although almost two thirds of children with disabilities are out of school in 2019,<sup>(71)</sup> and the situation is even worst for girls with disabilities,<sup>(72)</sup> a political will exists to implement a multi-sectoral and decentralised vision for inclusive education.

In 2014, the Ministry of Education, UNICEF, Humanity & Inclusion and the regional education authority collaborated to pilot and evaluate an inclusive education programme in the Souss-Massa-Daraa region. The evaluation and pilot study identified major challenges at the regional governance level, including a lack of coordination between different service sectors. Despite this, the evaluation of the pilot programme indicated some positive results. Notably, the enrolment rates of children with disabilities had increased to over 31%; sub-national authorities had earmarked funds for inclusive education; and there was improved coordination between education and health services.<sup>(73)</sup> A year later, in 2015, Morocco's national education strategic vision 2015-2030<sup>(74)</sup> was rolled out. It aims to include children with disabilities and sets out to strengthen partnerships with government directorates and authorities responsible for health and for partnerships with non-governmental organisations.

Building on these efforts, in 2019, the Ministry of Education undertook an evaluation of education for children with disabilities which led to a national debate and the development of an inclusive education national programme for children with disabilities for the period 2019-2021.<sup>(75)</sup> In line with the national education strategic vision, a memorandum<sup>(76)</sup> was addressed to regional and provincial directors regarding the implementation of this national programme. It identifies the core mission as the development of government partnerships with the public and private sectors and with civil society organisations; and for the provision of school meals, transport, basic rehabilitation equipment, and sports and leisure activities.

While moving to inclusive education systems is primarily the mandate of the Ministry of Education, one of the mandates of the Ministry of the Family, Solidarity, Equality and Social Development is to coordinate government programmes in the field of disability. This ministry contributes to education for children with disabilities by providing support to the organisations that manage education, rehabilitation, training and functional care services in specialised centres, in government schools, and in training institutions.

Not only does Morocco's inclusive education programme require a level of multi-sectoral cooperation, albeit between two main ministries for now, but it also uses a decentralised approach for education. In this way, various local stakeholders are encouraged and enabled to collaborate and coordinate around disability and education. To this end, coordination mechanisms (like an inter-ministerial committee) can be found at various levels. That said, reviews have also identified that there is additional room to further clarify the roles and responsibilities of the governmental and non-governmental stakeholders involved at different levels, and to reinforce coordination mechanisms to ensure consistency and synergy across interventions.<sup>(77)</sup>

# 7. Building multi-sectoral, disability-inclusive education systems: key considerations

When supporting or planning the progressive transformation of education systems to become inclusive, there are a number of key considerations which should be used to guide efforts.

## Putting children at the centre

Inclusive education reforms should build upon the core commitment to look at the needs of the child as the starting point. Each child is understood to have their own specific needs which must be analysed within the context of a set of relationships and support mechanisms with and between parents, carers, families, schools and communities, as well as government, civil society, non-government agencies and service providers.<sup>(78)</sup> When children's wellbeing and rights are framed in this way, we can identify how different sectors and issues are impacting a child and how to collaborate, plan and work across these sectors to remove obstacles and improve access to quality education.

Another important approach which is engendered by a child-centred strategy is enabling children to play a greater role in their own wellbeing

and to participate in different levels of decision-making.<sup>(79)</sup> For instance, children might participate in reviewing the curricula and input into the development of teaching materials. School governance bodies might also include children through various forms of learner representation and children can be enabled to support other children who are experiencing challenges.<sup>(80)</sup>

The child-centred approach also extends to teaching methods and is critical for achieving inclusive education. A child-centred teaching method is important as it facilitates multiple learning and development pathways. For instance, it encourages cooperative learning, it develops flexibility to embrace different learning contexts, and it helps us rethink child learning assessment strategies and the roles of educators.<sup>(81)</sup>

## How inclusive schools can facilitate access to health services and accurate diagnosis

A UNICEF-funded Humanity & Inclusion inclusive education project, in Nepal, supported health and developmental screenings in schools, to improve the diagnosis of children's medical needs, and also to help identify any additional learning needs children may have in the classroom.

Neru is a child who had previously been thought to be deaf and attended a resource class for children with hearing impairment. Resource classes are attached to mainstream schools, and children attend classes in the mainstream school in addition

to the resource class. In Neru's school, he was able to freely mix with children with and without disabilities but he was mainly taught using sign language. However, he was struggling to keep up with the lessons and to understand sign language as quickly as the other children.

The specific screenings and assessments that took place at his school (as part of the Inclusive Education project) meant that Neru was given a correct diagnosis of intellectual disabilities. This meant that his teachers could have a better



understanding of his needs and were able to modify the way they taught the curriculum accordingly. Teachers have now been trained to use a multi-sensory approach, with a mixture of verbal and visual learning methods combined with simple gestures, and the use of manipulatives

and concrete learning material. His teachers use a slower pace and give him plenty of opportunities for repetition of key learning points. This combination works well and has really contributed to Neru's progress.

## Twin-track – a two-pronged, sustained transformation process

Moving towards inclusive education is understood to be a process of transformation that necessitates short-, medium- and long-term strategies, together with sustained support for learners who are at higher risk of being left behind. For this reason, Humanity & Inclusion promotes and uses a twin-track approach.

The Inclusive Education Initiative, created in 2018 with great involvement of civil society organisations (including Humanity & Inclusion) in its inception and hosted by the World Bank, defines the twin-track approach to disability-inclusive education as an approach that ensures children with disabilities are meaningfully and fully included within education through two basic principles: 1) ensuring mainstream education is universally designed for learners and 2) developing targeted support to address the specific needs of children with disabilities.

Using a twin-track approach is already well-established across the development and education

sectors. The twin-track approach acknowledges that children with disabilities, as well as other children, have different needs and may require specific and targeted support in order to access and progress in education, on an equal basis as others. In practice this means that while one track should focus on making education systems fully inclusive, a second track should focus on empowering children with disabilities. This is in acknowledgement that moving to fully inclusive education systems takes time and capacity, and that some children will require specific support.

For example, in Rwanda, Humanity & Inclusion have embedded a member of staff to work within the Rwandan Education Board (part of the Ministry of Education) to support them to develop inclusive policies, action plans and teaching training materials at national level, whilst also supporting individual approaches at community level, such as providing support from community education volunteers and other initiatives.

## Collaborating with civil society and non-governmental organisations

For decades, organisations of persons with disabilities, grassroots organisations, non-governmental organisations, as well as parents and other stakeholders, have been vocal advocates for inclusive education and disability. They have made significant contributions to national, regional and global policy around disability and education. Where groups and organisations comprise persons with disabilities, the expert input and voices of persons with disabilities have been amplified.

Civil society and non-governmental organisations are often also key service providers for persons with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries by helping to fill the gaps in government service provision. In some cases, services may be provided in cooperation with particular ministry, while in other cases organisations provide services independently.<sup>(82)</sup> The latter is especially so in emergency contexts, where government service provision may not be adequate or even possible.

In recent years, there has been a shift in the kinds of services provided by civil society and non-governmental organisations around disability and education. Previously, these actors offered alternatives to state education and training for persons with disability and other excluded groups – but these are parallel, not complementary, systems. More recently, the approach has been to provide services which can complement state education systems.<sup>(83)</sup>

Civil society and non-governmental organisations are increasingly linking or referring to government agencies and service providers, and working to boost, not replace, the capacity of government initiatives.<sup>(84)</sup> This approach is preferable, as it not only helps strengthen government education systems overall, but it helps embed specialised service provision in public education systems.<sup>(85)</sup>

## Enhancing cooperation and coordination between central and local authorities

In countries where decentralisation processes have been established, inclusive education systems require strong cross-sectoral coordination at central and sub-national levels, with clear roles, responsibilities and accountability.<sup>(86)(87)</sup>

Recently, many countries have moved to decentralise decision-making and spending to sub-national levels of government.<sup>(88)</sup> In practice, this means that ministries for education not only need to work horizontally across other ministries, but also vertically with various local authorities.

Depending on which model of decentralisation has been put in place, local authorities at provincial, regional, district or municipal level have more responsibility and decision-making powers, and may also have more specifically-allocated resources to plan with. For education, this might include local authorities being responsible for the construction and maintenance of buildings, the monitoring of schools, the recruitment of teachers and professional development, and even curriculum development. Other sectors which play

a role in inclusive education approaches such as transport, urban development and community services, might also be decentralised. Where an effective decentralisation strategy has been put in place, there is the potential to improve the quality of education services, including learning outcomes, as well as strengthen democratic decision-making processes, use education resources more efficiently, and plan education services to suit local contexts and needs.<sup>(89)</sup>

However, where decentralisation is poorly planned it can also create challenges for education, for example, where roles and responsibilities are not clear and result in overlap, conflicting decisions, or gaps. Additionally, it has the potential to exacerbate inequality where local authorities are required to mobilise some of their own resources. This is often because capacity will most likely differ from one administrative area to another. Areas with weak capacity, or which have particularly challenging contexts, may struggle to mobilise adequate resources.<sup>(90)(91)</sup>

### Programme study – Local commissions contribute to children with disabilities' access to and retention in schools, in Burkina Faso

In Burkina Faso, the Ministry of Education, with the support of Humanity & Inclusion, established a mechanism for stronger collaboration between the Ministry and several stakeholders at national and local levels to enable them to identify, enrol and retain children with disabilities in primary schools and

prepare their transition to secondary and Technical and Vocational Educational Training (TVET).

Local stakeholders play a central role in the inclusion process, in light of the political decentralization in place in the country. Under the leadership of the

mayor, a commission made up of representatives from the health, social action, education sectors and from organisations of persons with disabilities meets regularly to analyse the situation of children with disabilities in the municipality. This commission, set up by a communal decree, is responsible for the planning, implementation and evaluation of inclusive education activities. These activities include the identification of children with disabilities, their referral to social, health and education services, their follow-up, and awareness raising carried out

in the municipality territory. Each local stakeholder member of the Commission brings added value and technical expertise, thus making the commission a solid and dynamic structure at local level.

Seventeen communal committees have been set up in four provinces. At the end of 2019, 11.322 children with disabilities were identified and accessed education through the municipal commissions.

## Connected, interagency service delivery for maximised returns

“Transportation is the main cause of dropout at our school. It is too expensive for parents. We see that if the school has a canteen, the rate of schooling increases because it motivates parents to enroll their kids.”

(Director of a school in Niamey, Niger)<sup>(92)</sup>

Multi-sectoral approaches can enable more coordinated, streamlined and cost-effective service delivery, and are a necessary and practical way to implement inclusive education systems. Within this context, integrated service delivery refers to examples of joined-up services from various sectors which work as a whole, in a collaborative, coordinated and policy-aligned manner. Where service delivery is undertaken with the collaboration of different service providers, there is evidence that this can significantly improve the quality of the services and support offered to children, young people and their families.<sup>(93)</sup>

Strategies to ensure integrated service delivery often require one of the service providers to take on the role of focal point for referrals to other services. In other cases, a range of different services might be provided from a single site.<sup>(94)</sup> In this sense, schools are increasingly becoming more than just a place where children learn. They can also be places where children can access multiple services, including nutrition programmes, rehabilitation, psychosocial support and protection services. This makes sense, as schools are a relatively easy way to reach large numbers of

children and are well placed to play a strong role in supporting children and their families. School-based health programmes are a popular and helpful example of this idea in action.<sup>(95)</sup> The World Health Organization’s (WHO) review of global nutrition 2016-2017 found that 89% of the 160 countries examined had some type of school health and nutrition programme attached to schools.<sup>(96)</sup>

When services are available as part of a comprehensive and integrated package, they are more easily accessible and more likely to be taken up, with significant benefit for children with complex needs, including those with disabilities.<sup>(97)</sup> Services offered in this way are often more cost-effective, because they are offered under a single programme rather than several separate programmes. There is strong evidence that integrated approaches can also lead to more children receiving services, increased rates of follow up care, and more frequent screening and assessments.<sup>(98)</sup> Additional evidence points to significant positive impacts on young children’s cognitive and behavioural outcomes where services that integrated childcare with education were provided.<sup>(99)</sup>

## Programme study – Strengthening resource centre capacities in Palestine to provide diverse services and referral pathways for school children with disabilities

Humanity & Inclusion, with funding from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Luxembourg, works in a multi-sectoral way to support education, rehabilitation and livelihoods for persons with disabilities in Palestine. Humanity & Inclusion's programme "Facilitate equitable access to education and work opportunities for persons with disabilities in Palestine" has the primary aim of strengthening referral systems between sectors.

During the early 2000s the Palestine Ministry of Education and Higher Education started to establish resource centres for persons with disabilities, as well as for their families and employers. These centres provide early detection and assessment services, run training programmes, and support families and employers to learn about and change their attitudes towards persons with disabilities. They do not, however, function as separate segregated special schools but rather as assessment and signposting facilities which are designed to enhance and support the process of inclusive education.

The resource centres link to and support the schools, with specialised teams that typically comprise a physiotherapist, a social worker,

a special education teacher, and a vision and mobility teacher. By housing these specialised services and supports under one roof, and linking to the school, the resource centres are important initiatives that strengthen inclusive education for children with disabilities.

It is challenging to run an effective resource centre in a context such as Palestine where there is limited capacity and where resources are scarce. In response to this, the project helps build the capacities of the resource centre teams around key knowledge and skills. This specifically includes strengthening capacities in relation to referral systems, data collection and monitoring, and ensuring standardised, quality service provision. Humanity & Inclusion has also supported resource centres by undertaking a mapping of the available rehabilitation and psychosocial support services. This will help strengthen referral pathways by linking learners from the resource centre to a wider range of specialised services outside of the centre. Additionally, a database officer will develop a resource centre database so that referrals are more systematic and can be tracked, and data can be gathered.

## Collecting more, and better, data on disability

One major challenge for improving education and ensuring more generally the rights of persons with disabilities has always been the lack of timely, disaggregated data, including by disability (type and degree); gender; and age; which can be used to understand the scale and trends in relation to disability, and to guide prioritisation and decision-making.<sup>(100)</sup>

With this in mind, the SDG 17's target 17.18 is specifically designed to build the capacity of countries to collect more timely, quality and disaggregated data on disability. This should be considered a priority when striving for effective inclusive education strategies and frameworks.

However, the UNESCO 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report shows that, since 2015, 41% of countries have not undertaken a publicly available household survey to provide disaggregated data on key education indicators.<sup>(101)</sup>

There are already a number of robust and valuable tools which can be used to collect disability-disaggregated data. Humanity & Inclusion uses and promotes the use of the "Washington Group Short Set of Questions" and the "Child Functioning Module" across its projects, with its partners and other stakeholders. These tools are designed for data collection as opposed to identifying or diagnosing disability,<sup>(102)</sup> as they allow to identify

any functional limitations in different domains such as vision, hearing or mobility, to name but a few.<sup>(103)</sup> For instance, a recent pilot project in Nepal, supported by Humanity & Inclusion, has aimed to integrate these tools into the Educational Management Information System.

Cooperation across education ministry directorates and agencies, as well as between other sector ministries, statistical agencies and with non-state actors helps collect more, and improved, population-level data on disability, which can contribute to early identification, effective assessment and adequate referral of persons with disabilities to support services. Indeed, disability-data should be collected by all implementing partners and stakeholders. This should include schools, local non-governmental partners and civil society, as well as government agencies.<sup>(104)</sup> This level of collaboration around data collection

simultaneously requires and enables strong coordination mechanisms, such as open platforms, which allow different partners and sectors to share and access reliable, harmonised, and disaggregated data.<sup>(105)</sup>

Some successful examples of improved data collection include Ghana's four-year Education Sector Medium-Term Development Plan (2018-2021) where a number of governmental agencies are working collaboratively, having each identified a sector focal point responsible for sharing data and other information. Uzbekistan has also made efforts to strengthen its Education Sector Plan in order to improve the quality, reliability and availability of the data collected by a number of ministries and agencies working for education. This includes developing and integrating a special needs monitoring and evaluation strategy into the broader monitoring and evaluation framework.<sup>(106)</sup>

## Exploring strategies to include the youngest children

Young children with disabilities (under -8 years old) are often excluded from education policy and programmes, including most current inclusive education reforms. Truly inclusive education systems also need to cater for the youngest children.

Central to effective Early Childhood Development (ECD) policies and programming is the recognition that the youngest children's needs are best addressed through multi-sectoral strategies, policy and programmes which link with the sectors including health, nutrition, education, labour, finance, WASH, social protection and child protection.

To this effect, the Framework on Nurturing Care,<sup>(107)</sup> which was collaboratively developed by WHO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, promotes a "whole-of-government" and a "whole-of-society" approach to strengthening ECD, with the notable inclusion of children's learning from birth.



The weekly children's club activities, organized by HI's Growing Together team, mean the world to the Burmese children who grow up in Thai shelter camps. Children with disabilities are included. The idea is that children can play and develop in a safe space. © Nicolas Axelrod-Ruom/HI.

## How the United Kingdom's government is supporting multi-sectoral education policies which prioritise the most vulnerable

Some 7.4% of the United Kingdom's (UK) bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA) is spent on the education sector and the UK is a major contributor to global, multilateral funding initiatives.<sup>(108)</sup> For instance, it is the largest contributor to the Education Cannot Wait fund which focuses on education in emergencies.<sup>(109)</sup> The UK also contributes over 20% of the total contributions to the Global Partnership for Education<sup>(110)</sup> and will co-host the replenishment campaign in 2021. Additionally, in 2019, with support from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, the UK launched the Inclusive Education Initiative, hosted by the World Bank.

The UK's most recent ODA education policy (under the Department for International Development [DfID] which has since become the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office [FCDO]) was adopted in 2018, after multi-sectoral consultations. The resulting policy has three main priorities: 1) investing in good teaching; 2) backing education system reform to deliver results in the classroom; and 3) increasing targeted support to the most marginalised.<sup>(111)</sup> Where the most marginalised families and learners are concerned, the policy prioritises education for children with disabilities and ensuring that larger numbers can transition into mainstream education. To add to this, supporting children affected by crises and improving the future prospects of hard-to-reach girls are other key focus areas. The UK also has a DfID Strategy for Disability Inclusive Development 2018-23 which aligns with its education policy. To this end, education is one of the strategic pillars for action within the disability strategy, with a focus on both access and learning outcomes.<sup>(112)</sup>

The 2018 DfID Education Policy has earmarked social protection, health, WASH, and economic development as critical sectors that should link with and support education initiatives, including multi-sectoral approaches needed in early childhood and transition to primary school.



Fanta is 7 years old and she has cerebral palsy. She is involved in the Girls' Education Challenge project in Sierra Leone. Fanta has received a wheelchair and she is now in school.

© J. McGeown/Hi.

At the country level, several ongoing UK-funded projects have adopted multi-sectoral approaches including the "Pakistan National Cash Transfers" programme which aims to improve living standards and educational attainment in the poorest families by providing regular payments to the female head of household. Their flagship Girls Education Challenge Fund also supports multi-sectoral projects, such as linking livelihoods, vocational training and inclusive education in Nepal, or supporting village saving and loans associations to support inclusive education in Sierra Leone (both projects where Humanity & Inclusion is involved). Finally, the Strategic Partnership Arrangement II between the UK and Bangladeshi organisation, BRAC, targets the most marginalised people, including persons with disabilities, by improving access to education, nutritional support, family planning services, and access to clean water and sanitation.<sup>(113)</sup>

## 8. Priorities for action: recommendations for inclusive education in low- and middle-income countries



Recommendations for governments and donors at a glance	
 DOs	 DON'Ts
<p>✓ <b>Transform education systems</b> so they are fully inclusive, <b>taking account of all interconnecting factors</b></p>	<p>✗ Consider inclusive education as being a process whereby <b>children with disabilities are simply placed in mainstream schools without any support or full inclusion being in place.</b></p>
<p>✓ <b>Establish mechanisms and initiatives</b> for cross-sectoral dialogue, coordination, and partnerships and develop strategies to link educational and other essential services (health, rehabilitation, nutrition, protection...)</p>	<p>✗ <b>Assume</b> that different governmental sectors and stakeholders will systematically coordinate amongst themselves, without any specific frame in place.</p>
<p>✓ <b>Adopt a twin-track approach in funding</b>, by providing resources for inclusive education systems in general and, at the same time, allocating a specific stream of funding to address the needs of the most marginalized learners, including children with disabilities</p>	<p>✗ <b>Just allocate a general budget to education</b>, without tracking funding for inclusion and without earmarking the portion of funding that goes to the education of marginalised groups, including children with disabilities.</p>
<p>✓ <b>Ensure meaningful participation</b>, by actively involving and consulting persons with disabilities, parents, learners and educators and their networks</p>	<p>✗ <b>'Tick the box' for participation of other stakeholders</b>, without really ensuring the opportunity to be listened for all a variety of groups, including the most marginalized.</p>

Figure 6. A practical list of DOs and DON'Ts for governments and donors.

### Allocate and track more resources for inclusive education

#### Governments should:

- **Mobilise** an increased share of domestic resources for free, quality and inclusive national education. National education budgets should represent between 4% to 6% of national Gross Domestic Product and 20% of total budgets.<sup>(114)</sup>
- **Direct** specific streams of finances and resources to the most vulnerable and excluded children.

#### Donors should:

- **Prioritise** and increase financial and technical support, bilaterally and multilaterally, to low- and middle-income countries for inclusive education system reform. The Education Commission's 2016 report recommends that \$89 billion per year should be spent on education until 2030 in order to achieve SDG 4; this figure is now a bare minimum due to increased costs arising from the COVID pandemic.<sup>(115)</sup>

- **Earmark** funding for disability-inclusive education, using disability tags such as the “OECD-DAC Marker” to track funding for inclusion and report against equity indicators.
- **Contribute** to joint initiatives which pool resources and technical expertise including the Global Partnership for Education, Education Cannot Wait, and the Inclusive Education Initiative. This includes raising contributions (as called by joint civil society asks) to their regular

replenishments of these funds, as the Global Partnership for Education funding campaign for the cycle 2021-2025.

- **Support** twin-track approaches by providing resources to strengthen inclusive education systems while also supporting strategies which address the specific barriers faced by the most marginalised learners, including children with disabilities.

## Accelerate action to radically transform education systems

### Donors and governments should:

- **Commit** to improving education systems by supporting and undertaking reviews and revisions of education systems and committing to inclusive education strategies and frameworks.
- **Build** COVID-19 and disease outbreak mitigation and resilience strategies into revised education frameworks.

### Governments should:

- **Galvanise** political commitment and efforts to fulfil obligations and commitments under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and Sustainable Development Goal 4.
- **Put in place a framework** to enable the transition towards inclusive education, which encompasses: ensuring that school staff are trained on inclusive education approaches and pedagogy; supporting parents', caregivers' and childrens' input into policy, programmes and infrastructure decisions; raising community awareness on inclusive education; and applying universal design for learning as an overarching principle at school and classroom level.

### Donors should:

- **Increase** technical and financial support to low- and middle-income countries in their efforts to transition towards inclusive education systems, and prioritise investments supporting public, free, and quality education that is inclusive for all learners.

### Non-governmental organisations and civil society should:

- **Hold** duty-bearers accountable on commitments to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- **Support** government decision-makers and authorities to develop and implement inclusive education frameworks and strategies by providing expertise and insight.
- **Strengthen** advocacy and programme partnerships with other non-governmental actors across sectors and groups, to catalyse knowledge building, pool capacity, and enhance understandings of inclusion.

## Move towards multi-sectoral frameworks for inclusive education

### Government, civil society and non-governmental organisations should:

- **Work** in partnership and across sectors to ensure that children with disabilities benefit.

### Governments should:

- **Establish** mechanisms and initiatives for cross-sectoral dialogue, coordination, and partnerships.

- **Ensure** that Education Sector Plans aim at transitioning to inclusive education and include children with disabilities, with a consistent budget allocated, by coordinating across the relevant sectors.

### Non-governmental organisations and civil society should:

- **Advocate** for a multi-sectoral approach to inclusive education.



- **Promote and implement** a multi-sectoral approach in projects and programmes on inclusive education, aiming at improving access

to both mainstream and disability-specific services (in education, health, livelihood, protection and social welfare).

## Plan for fully connected service delivery

### Governments should:

- **Develop** strategies where a number of linked services (i.e. rehabilitation, health, social protection, social support, nutrition...) for children with disabilities can be provided at a single site, or at least sign-posted, for instance in schools.
- **Establish** and prioritise effective coordination mechanisms with and between local authorities

and allocate adequate resources and support. This is a priority in countries where government is decentralised.

- **Extend** coordination mechanisms, support and resources to connected services including transport, urban safety and accessibility, community health and social services.

## Expand and strengthen the collection of disaggregated data on disability

### All stakeholders should:

- **Use** the “Washington Group Short Set of Questions” and the “Child Functioning Model” to collect data.
- **Disaggregate data**, in particular by disability, gender and age.

### Governments should:

- **Use** disability data to monitor progress and to better inform and adapt policies and actions, towards the realisation of SDG 4.

## Ensure meaningful participation of children, adults and families with disabilities

### Governments and donors should:

- **Actively involve** and consult persons with disabilities, parents, learners and educators, as well the organisations which represent them.
- **Develop** or strengthen participatory approaches and mechanisms for policy and programming in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- **Support** non-governmental organisations and civil society to advocate and deliver services around disability and inclusive education.

### Non-governmental organisations and civil society agencies should:

- **Play** a strong role in enabling the participation of persons with disabilities – as well as parents, learners and educators – in national and other level planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of inclusive education policies and programmes.

“It is important to stand together and exchange on strategies that have proven effective, so that the call for inclusion will be listened by decision makers and persons with disabilities will be taken into consideration in decision-making processes.”

(Mr. Idriss Alzouma Maïga, Chair of the African Disability Forum)

# Annex 1. Looking beyond SDG 4 - A reference guide to inclusive education and the Sustainable Development Goals

SDG 4 is not the only goal to support quality inclusive education. Beyond SDG 4, a number of interdependencies exist between many of the SDGs and are important considerations when working towards inclusive education systems. This section describes the multi-dimensional aspects of

diverse SDGs in relation to children with disabilities and inclusive education systems. Once more, this demonstrates very clearly how multi-sectoral approaches are a necessary strategy for achieving inclusive education.



**Household poverty is a major barrier to education for children with disabilities but inclusive education systems can help break these poverty cycles.**

Poverty is now generally understood to be multi-dimensional and cyclical. This means that poverty is not only economic – namely, the lack of adequate income – but is a combination of many interlinked socio-economic aspects, including a lack of access to education. Additionally, these challenges and barriers feed into poverty and tend to further reinforce themselves. This means that it is often hard for a person or household to move out of poverty and that this pattern will often be repeated from one generation to the next.

When considering the economic dimensions of poverty, an educated population is a key prerequisite and critical investment for strong economic growth and poverty reduction. This is particularly relevant for children with disabilities, who often miss out on quality education, and are therefore more likely to experience poverty. In examples from Nepal and the Philippines, it has been estimated that investing in education for persons with disabilities generated national economic returns of up to 25%.<sup>(116)</sup> More generally,

UNESCO estimated that if all adults globally had completed secondary school, the world's poverty rate would be more than halved.<sup>(117)</sup>

Notably, we also know that poverty and disability are also very closely linked and that persons with disabilities and their households are more likely to live in poverty.<sup>(118)(119)</sup> For instance, families caring for children with disabilities may need to spend more on services such as health, specialised services, or child care.<sup>(120)</sup> These extra costs may mean less household income for education, which in turn can mean that children with disabilities have lower levels of school enrolment, attendance and educational progress compared to children without disabilities. From a gender perspective, women in the household may need to devote significantly more of their time to caring for a child with a disability. In particular, girls with disabilities are often disproportionately affected by this poverty and exclusion cycle, as they are more likely to be kept at home to provide care, rather than attend school.<sup>(121)</sup>



**Food insecurity affects children's levels of access to and attendance at school, as well as their performance. Access to education helps reduce food insecurity.**

The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) reported in 2018 that in low- and middle-income countries, persons with disabilities and their households are more likely to be food insecure, compared to persons and households without disabilities.<sup>(122)</sup>

Household food insecurity contributes to children with disabilities being more likely to be excluded from education or have poor educational outcomes. For instance, household food insecurity can have devastating effects on the development of young children including a failure to thrive physically, intellectually and socially. Additionally,

learners from food insecure households tend to have higher levels of absenteeism from school compared to their peers from relatively more food secure households. This is partly attributable to links between household food insecurity and higher incidences of communicable and non-communicable disease and psychosocial difficulties.<sup>(123)</sup>

There is also a strong gender dimension, as girls with disabilities are especially vulnerable in this regard. They are less likely than boys to receive care and food, and are also more likely to be excluded from family interactions and activities.<sup>(124)</sup> Importantly, the level of girls' and women's education is a key determinant of household food security, as girls and women are primarily responsible for household and community food security and nutrition levels. Improving girls'

access to and quality of education is therefore an investment which can lead to increased household spending on nutrition and improved child health and wellbeing indicators.<sup>(125)</sup>

School attendance also has an impact on children's food and nutrition levels because many children depend on receiving a daily meal at school. In 2020, we have seen how the COVID-19 related school closures have negatively impacted on many children's access to daily food and nutrition.<sup>(126)</sup> Additionally, higher education levels correlate with greater knowledge of healthy behaviours, including eating for good nutrition.<sup>(127)</sup> Higher levels of education also lead to higher rates of employment and income, which in turn helps families reach better levels of food security and reduces vulnerability during times of crisis.<sup>(128)</sup>



**Poor health and wellbeing not only impacts on a child's access to education but also on their educational progress and outcomes. Education helps improve health indicators and wellbeing.**

Ensuring access to quality education is an important strategy for enhancing the health and wellbeing of individuals. In the first instance, education levels are linked to greater employment opportunities and income which can enable people to access quality health services.<sup>(129)</sup> Beyond access to health services, access to education can also help people lead safe and healthy lifestyles, as well as nurturing human development, relationships and personal, family and community wellbeing more broadly.<sup>(130)</sup>

For children, poor health can significantly affect their access to education, for instance it can delay enrolment, increase absenteeism and contribute to dropping out of school.<sup>(131)</sup> This is especially so for children with disabilities in low- to middle-income countries, who may have health impairments as a result of higher risks from disease, accident, conflict or natural disaster. To compound this, while

children with disabilities may have greater health needs, they also face multiple barriers when it comes to accessing general and specific services, including rehabilitation and assistive technologies.

For girls with disabilities, access to disability-inclusive sexual and reproductive health and rights services and education is critical in reducing vulnerability. Girls with disabilities are often denied access to services and education which then increases their risk of sexual abuse or unwanted pregnancy.<sup>(132)</sup> This in turn, is often linked to girls dropping out of school. More generally, higher education levels in women are linked to higher levels of health and access to sexual and reproductive health and rights services. For mothers, this positive impact also benefits their children, who experience better levels of healthcare and education as a result.<sup>(133)</sup>



**Structural gender inequalities are a barrier to education for all, but education contributes to reducing gender inequalities.**

In 2011, it was estimated that only 42% of girls with disabilities had completed primary school, compared to 51% of boys with disabilities and 52.9% of girls without disabilities.<sup>(134)</sup> Therefore,

in the context of education, a child's gender and ability impacts on their access to education, with girls with disabilities being the most excluded of all groups. Families often prioritise investing in

boys' education over girls, both with and without disabilities, because boys are considered to have greater potential for employment and income generation.<sup>(135)</sup> At times, boys with disabilities can also be excluded because of their gender. For instance, a Humanity & Inclusion's assessment in Lebanon and Jordan it was found that boys with disabilities were even less likely to enrol in school than girls with disabilities, and whilst further investigation for the cause of this is needed, the researchers suggested that families there were more likely to send boys with disabilities to do paid work, than girls with disabilities, which is why they were out of school, and also increase bullying for boys is another factor.

Ensuring equal access to education for all boys and girls, regardless of ability, has the potential to impact on broader gender inequalities. For instance, equal education opportunities can lead to greater employment opportunities for women which can confer greater social status on women.



**Unemployment and weak economic growth are barriers to education, especially for persons with disabilities. When children with disabilities can access quality education, their job prospects and broader economic outcomes improve.**

Persons with disabilities experience extremely high unemployment rates, which is linked in part to a lack of or poor education. In 2007, the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that in low- and middle-income countries, up to 80% of working-age persons with disabilities who sought employment, were unemployed.<sup>(139)</sup> Additionally, in households where children with disabilities are not at school, a further deleterious effect on household incomes can be seen, mainly because a household member may have to provide care to the child instead of income generating activities.

Primary level education has been shown to be an important investment in the positive economic growth and development of a country by helping build skills, knowledge and the potential of

Additionally, equal education opportunities for girls can help narrow gender-related income gaps.<sup>(136)</sup> For example, it has been found that in Pakistan, women with a primary education earn 51% of what men earn with similar level of education. When women have a secondary education, this ratio improves, and rises to 70%.<sup>(137)</sup>

Globally, girls and women who have the same levels of access to education as boys and men are also more likely to have an increased awareness of their rights and ability to report abuses and to control decisions concerning their lives. Inclusive education, in particular, has an important role to play within the context of gender and education, as it can contribute to challenging social norms and negative stereotypes, especially for girls. For instance, UNESCO estimated that if every girl worldwide received a secondary education, this would lead to a reduction in child marriages by two thirds.<sup>(138)</sup>

its population to become more economically productive.<sup>(140)(141)</sup> Therefore, ensuring that all children complete quality and inclusive primary level education is critical both for the individual and for socio-economic development.

Children, including those with disabilities, who access quality, inclusive primary level education are also better set up to transition to higher levels of education and training, which in turn will increase their employment potential and ability to earn higher incomes.<sup>(142)</sup> In 2009, the ILO reported that where children and adults with disabilities are excluded from education and employment, some low- and middle-income countries had lost up to 7% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP).<sup>(143)</sup>



**Inequalities result in limited provision of and access to educational services, but education for all reduces inequalities within and between countries.**

Inequality and disability are closely associated across all social, economic, and political spheres, including all of the SDG priority areas. In 2018, UNDESA estimated that some low- and middle-

income countries showed income gaps between persons with and without disabilities of more than 20%.<sup>(144)</sup> More generally, entrenched and rising inequality is impeding global and national

development.<sup>(145)</sup> For low- and middle-income countries, this also means that public spending on education is inadequate.<sup>(146)</sup>

Unequal access to education has been identified as one of the underlying reasons for inequality in low and middle-income countries. Where significant investment is made to improve access to education, income inequality decreases and participation in public life increases.<sup>(147)</sup> Of note, it is generally understood that investing in the education of the most vulnerable children, including children with disabilities has the greatest potential to narrow inequalities and lead to more equitable opportunities in later life. This is especially so in low- and middle-income countries.<sup>(148)</sup>



**Inclusive, disaster-resilient urban and school infrastructures can enable access to education for all. The transformation towards inclusive education systems also positively impacts on infrastructure environments.**

In urban contexts, planning needs to respect and take into account a diverse population. For many low- and middle-income countries this also includes planning to make urban areas more resilient to natural disasters. Inclusive approaches to urban disaster risk management are critical in ensuring that education services can continue to reach the most vulnerable populations during an emergency. More generally, improving the accessibility, safety, and resilience of cities and schools can benefit all urban communities and society at large.<sup>(152)</sup>

Inclusive education requires that school infrastructure, including recreation areas, WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene facilities), and roads and transport are designed with accessibility and safety in mind. These infrastructure considerations are critical as they can significantly influence school access and attendance rates for children with disabilities.<sup>(153)(154)</sup> Girls can be particularly affected by safety concerns, for instance, from sexual

Social protection is a strategy which has been shown to help address income inequalities and benefit families and persons with disabilities. For instance, a 2012 review of cash transfer programmes for persons with disabilities implemented in low- and middle-income countries across the globe revealed a number of positive socio-economic and service access outcomes, including access to education.<sup>(149)</sup>

For this reason, greater public investment combined with education strategies which prioritise the most excluded and address inequality are urgently needed in order to tackle existing inequalities, prevent increased inequality, and to “leave no one behind.”<sup>(150)(151)</sup>

and physical harassment, violence and abuse experienced travelling to and from school, or while at school.<sup>(155)</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how WASH facilities in schools are vital in helping control the outbreak and making schools safer, but also how they are often inaccessible to children with disabilities.<sup>(156)</sup> Also, it is important that messages about hygiene and the importance of handwashing need to be inclusive and accessible for all.

Encouragingly, the level of investment required when planning an inclusive school infrastructure is relatively low, especially when compared to the socio-economic cost of not investing in inclusive schools and education systems.<sup>(157)</sup> In 2011, the WHO and the World Bank estimated that investment in inclusion when building school infrastructure need only make up 1% of the total cost.<sup>(158)</sup>



**Natural disasters have a huge impact people’s lives, especially the most vulnerable, often making access to quality education challenging. However, access to education can help build resilience to natural disasters.**

Natural disasters as result of climate change, such as flood or drought, can impact on education on more than one level. For instance, natural disasters often mean that schools are damaged

or need to close, while simultaneously negatively affecting many households’ health, nutrition and income generation, creating further barriers to education.<sup>(159)</sup> To add to this, natural disasters and

other emergencies can put a strain on national budgets and other resources, at times diverting resources away from supports which help children access education and other essential services.<sup>(160)</sup>

Evidence shows that disasters are generally associated with lower rates of school enrolment, which is particularly noticeable in contexts where there are already high levels of poverty.<sup>(161)</sup> For instance, a four-country study (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam) found that exposure to floods reduced the number of completed grades for children in three of the countries - Ethiopia, India, and Vietnam.<sup>(162)</sup>

Disaster risk reduction programming and implementation often do not take the needs of children with disabilities into consideration and there may also be additional children who acquire disabilities as a result of the disaster who require specific supports. This can result in these children becoming additionally vulnerable in terms of their physical and mental health, as

well as their education status. Furthermore, the stigma, discrimination and communication barriers often experienced by children with physical or intellectual disabilities may mean that they have limited access to information, vital resources, and social networks during an emergency.<sup>(163)</sup>

However, there is also evidence that children's and communities' vulnerability to risk is reduced and that resilience is built through access to education. On the individual level, accessing education can increase access to information and resources, as well as increase levels of knowledge, skills and risk perception, and contribute to improved and more resilient health and incomes.<sup>(164)</sup> On a societal level, where climate change is integrated into education curricula, young people can be empowered to change their behaviour and attitudes, to take action, or to adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change on their communities and societies.<sup>(165)</sup>



**Conflict, violence and lack of access to justice hinder strong, inclusive education systems. Inclusive education systems help build cohesive, just and peaceful societies.**

Children with disabilities are disproportionately affected by gaps in civil registration and vital statistics, including birth registration, which can prevent them from accessing a range of services, including education, and often make it harder for children to access justice.<sup>(166)(167)</sup>

SDG 4's Target 4.a. is to provide "safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments." When considered from this perspective, inclusive education systems have the potential to help bring about positive social change by promoting values and behaviours that can challenge violence and help build peaceful, cohesive and inclusive societies. There is evidence that educated citizens have greater awareness and are more knowledgeable concerning their rights, and that they are empowered to speak out about or report violations and abuse. For example, a number of studies have found that women who actively claimed their own rights had relatively higher levels of education. Including being better able to protect themselves from domestic violence.<sup>(168)</sup>

However, we also know that conflict or widespread violence negatively impacts on education systems. Not only do they disrupt the provision of education

services, but they also cause physical and mental harm and trauma, which can have long term impacts on the health and wellbeing of learners. Violence and abuse experienced both within and outside the school environment are also barriers that prevent some children, including those with disabilities, from accessing education.

Children with disabilities are particularly likely to be subject to this, as across the globe and in all contexts, they are three to four times more likely to be victims of violence.<sup>(169)</sup> Reasons for this include stigma and discrimination, lack of social support for those who care for them, institutionalisation, and sometimes a limited ability to communicate due to disability.<sup>(170)</sup> Where children with disabilities have not been taught life skills or sexual and reproductive health and rights, they are also more vulnerable to sexual abuse and violence. The risk of violence, including sexual violence, also increases when family protection and social structures break down, which is often the case in conflict and other emergency contexts.<sup>(171)</sup>

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