



Access to education by children with special needs: What are the issues?

OVERVIEW

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 calls for “*inclusive and quality education for all*”. This is in line with Article 30 and 34 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda (1995) which states that **education for all children is a right**. Uganda has enacted several disability-friendly laws, which include the: National Council on Disability Act 2003 (with additional amendments 2013); 2006 Disability Act; 2006 Equal Opportunities Commission Act 2006; 1997 Local Government Act, and the 1996 Children’s Statute 1996 (with amendments in 2016).

A number of policies and policy guidelines such as the National Policy on Disability in Uganda (2006) also support interventions for persons with disabilities. An Information Paper from UNESCO (2018) however reveals that persons with disability are among the population groups most likely to suffer from exclusion from education.

The policy brief explores the challenges constraining access to education by children with Special Needs (SN), and highlights good practices. The brief uses primary data collected by the Budget Monitoring and Accountability Unit, secondary data, and proposes policy recommendations for improvement.

Introduction

Disability is defined as permanent and substantial functional limitation of daily life activities caused by physical, mental or sensory impairment and environmental barriers resulting in limited participations¹. Under the Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy, government provides free education to all children in primary schools. The Uganda Functional Difficulties Survey (UFDS) 2017 collected information to highlight some facts about school attendance by children with disabilities. Findings reveal that 2 in every 10 children with disabilities are not attending school, compared to 1 in every 10 children

¹ National Policy on Disability in Uganda (2006)

KEY ISSUES

- i) Two in every 10 children with disabilities are not in school.
- ii) Bottlenecks such as limited funding, inadequate specialized teachers and specialized materials, poor attitude of parents towards children with special needs are constraining their access to education.
- iii) There is low emphasis on vocational training for children with special needs.
- iv) A high proportion of SN children therefore remain illiterate and unskilled.

without disabilities. Detailed findings are indicated in table 1.

Table 1: Percentage of children aged 6–16 years by school attendance

	Children with disabilities	Children without disabilities
Ever attended school	80.5	90.6
Male	81.2	90.3
Female	79	90.9
Current school attendance	76.1	98
Male	78.1	88
Female	76.9	88.9
Primary	80.1	90.5
Secondary	74.5	83.9

Source: Uganda Functional Difficulties Survey 2017



Further analysis indicates that whereas the ratio of males to females who have ever attended school is not very different (M 81.2: F 79); the girls with disabilities that are currently in school (76.9%) is lower indicating high dropout rates.

Interventions towards Equitable Access to Education by Children with Special Needs

Government allocates funds in form of subvention grants to support schools that have units for special needs. A total of 2.5 million children are disabled. There are special needs children in inclusive schools. The subvention grant however is provided to only 7,000 out of 50,000 children in primary schools. In secondary schools, out of 1,200 children with SN, the subvention is only provided to 500 children which indicates a significant funding gap. Each child is allocated Ug shs 20,000 per term towards provision of instructional materials like talking calculators, text books, first aid and a light meal. For instance, in FY 2018/19, Moyo Girls School received Ug shs 1,386,080 per quarter to support 22 SN children.

District Local Governments (DLGs) and beneficiary institutions indicated that the funding is meagre and has not been revised. Due to the widespread poverty, the parents have not supported the learners.

Lessons Learnt for Special Needs Children

Mbale is a model district towards education for SN children. The district has a functional Special Needs Department with a budget of Ug shs 23,000,000. Interventions by the department include; raising awareness in communities about SN and sensitizing parents to support children with SN, screening learners with hearing impairments, and assessing children's level of SN before enrolment. If a child is beyond the available intervention, they are referred to professionals such as Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT), speech and communication specialists, psychiatrists to diagnose the

actual challenge. From the assessment report, the SN child is sent to a specialised school with specialised teachers. In instances where a child is sent to an ordinary school, a specialised teacher is deployed. For instance; mentally challenged children are sent to Kireka School for the Mentally Handicapped; the physically challenged (lame) whose parents can afford are sent to Namengo Girls or Namengo Boys in Budaka District. The deaf are enrolled in Mbale School for the Deaf; which has primary, secondary and technical sections. These children are therefore suitably placed where they fit.

The district also works with child protection units or entities such as the Police, Probation Officers, and World Vision to ensure that the children are protected. The SN Department organises home based programs including counselling of parents to ensure that the children are safe when they return home. Mbale District has lobbied development partners to provide hearing aids, wheel chairs, and head gears for the children. They have Special Needs Committees that help in awareness raising, and rolling out SN programmes at the school level.

Iganga District has five SN centers majorly for the deaf and blind. These include; Barkley High, Nakalama Primary School (P/S), Bishop Willis P/S, Namungalwe P/S, and Iganga M.C. Nakalama P/S also caters for children with physical impairments, chronic sicknesses such as sickle cells and HIV. Teachers in these centers are trained, and the district ensures that they are posted and retained in these centers.

Challenges Constraining Access to Education by Children with Special Needs

The Government continues to promote inclusive education for all children of school-going age regardless of their ability or disability. Many children with profound conditions however do not benefit from the mainstream system. A number of constraints have kept children with



disabilities out of the inclusive system of education. These include;

a) Inadequate data on children with disabilities: Uganda ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and its optional Protocol on 28 September 2008 and is explicitly required to monitor its implementation by generating data. The protocol emphasizes the importance of mainstreaming disability issues as an integral part of relevant sustainable development strategies. It is further concerned that, despite the various instruments and undertakings, persons with disabilities continue to face barriers to their participation in education.

One of the observations of the CRPD committee 2016 report on Uganda relating to Article 31 on statistics and data collection was lack of systems to collect information on the situation of persons with disabilities in Uganda.

b) Limited Funding: Out of the Ug shs 605.9 billion towards the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) budget for FY 2018/19, SN receives Ug shs 3.4 billion (0.5%), and ranks second last of the nine programmes funded under the vote. With such limited funding, planning and allocating requisite resources to schools is impossible. Scholastic materials and school facilities are inadequate. The Special Needs Department of Mbale District highlighted that government had not put much emphasis on equipping these children with skills through vocational training.

At the district level, there is no specific budget towards SN. Officers in the districts of Bukedea, Kumi, Iganga and Sironko highlighted that the SN function is carried out along with inspection. Not all inspectors however are able to identify issues of SN. There are few districts with structures in place to help children with learning impairments. Budadiri Girls, a privately owned school in Sironko District caters for SN children. Even Mbale, the model district suffers low staffing due to inadequate funding. The SN officer has no assistant;

yet the office has a responsibility of handling SN issues in Mbale, Tororo, Manafwa, and neighbouring districts.

c) Inadequate specialised teachers: Moyo Girls Unit for the Blind has a total of 22 SN children of varied disability such as mental retardation, visual impairment, and physical handicap. The school lacks teachers proficient in braille transcription and sign language interpretation; with only one teacher who helps with visual impairment. The pupil to teacher ratio is therefore high. Nakalama P/S in Iganga District which has some children with hearing impairment lacks a specialised teacher. In Arua District, the three specialised units in Liria P/S, Eruba P/S for hearing impairment; and Arua Demonstration visual impairment are only found in urban areas. There are no specialised schools in the rural settings. In Katayi P/S, Arua, there are 28 pupils with mental, visual, and hearing impairments but with no specialised teachers. The SN children are learning in schools without specialised teachers and teachers do not know how to communicate with them.

Specialised teachers lack morale: Some specialised teachers are appointed as teachers and not SN teachers. Special Needs is a science but the SN teachers are getting a salary that ordinary teachers are getting. Teaching SN children is tedious, and there should be some motivation for the teachers.

d) Inadequate instructional materials: These materials are expensive and not readily available in the country. The Perkins braille costs Ug shs 2,000,000. The cost of a text book for special needs is Ug shs 400,000 per copy compared to 30,000 for ordinary children;

e) Inadequate facilities: There are few schools with specialised facilities for SN. In the available specialised units, the facilities are inadequate. For instance, dormitories and classrooms across SN centres in Iganga District; dilapidated infrastructures in Moyo Girls for the Blind especially the dormitory and resource room, and lack of a lighting system in these facilities.



The dormitory in Moyo Girls has developed cracks and the school is incapacitated to repair it, Mbale School for the Deaf too has inadequate accommodation. In Nakalama P/S, some classes lack ramps and specialised latrines for SN children.

f) Parents especially in rural areas put little effort in sending children with disabilities to school: This is majorly due to the negative attitude that parents have towards these children who they perceive as outcasts. They give the children names such as “Ombere” - meaning unable to walk (*Focus Group Discussion, Arua District, February 2019*). When they are convinced to send the children to school, they are abandoned at the school to cater for all their necessities. During the holidays, some parents of the SN children do not pick them. The management of Nakalama P/S indicated that some parents say, “If I bring this child, how much will you give me?” Whereas at every LC1, there is a special needs office, some parents with SN children hide this information.

Conclusion

Whereas inclusive education for all is promoted; with the UPE Policy providing education for all in Primary education, 2 in every 10 children with disabilities are not attending school. There is also low emphasis on vocational training yet most of the SN children are not academically talented. This means that a high proportion of SN children remain illiterate and unskilled. The identified constraints are solvable with commitment from the stakeholders.

Recommendations

1. The SN department of MoES should facilitate the collection, analysis and dissemination of gender and equity disaggregated data about persons with disabilities, and the barriers they face in accessing

education.

2. The Ministry of Public Service, MoES and Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development should provide higher remuneration to Special Needs teachers as per their specialisation.
3. The MoES should prioritise allocation to the subvention grant to Special Needs Units and create a budget line with the capitation grant for purchase of specialised equipment, facilities and materials for SN children.
4. The MoES should train specialised teachers, as well as the ordinary teachers to manage the overwhelming number of SN children.
5. The Ministry of Local Government should spearhead collaboration with District political leaders in mobilising and sensitizing communities to send Special Needs children to school.
6. The MoES should prioritise skills development of the SN children by enhancing vocational training in SN centres and schools with SN children.

References

1. Budget Monitoring and Accountability Unit Field Findings FY 2018/19
2. National Council for Disability Amendment Act 2013
3. National Policy on Disability in Uganda (2006)
4. UNICEF/MGLSD Situation Analysis on Children with Disabilities Living in Uganda 2014;
5. The Mapping Study on Community Based Rehabilitation programmes in Uganda 2015;
6. The Disability Scoping Study 2009; and Disability in Uganda: report of a UNDESA scoping mission 2016

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