



Inclusive Futures
Promoting disability inclusion



Preparing schools to welcome children with disabilities

Lessons from Inclusive Futures'
education projects

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Executive summary

Schools are central to children's education, but too many lack children with disabilities in their classrooms. Children with disabilities are more likely to miss school, have an interrupted education, or never enrol. To provide inclusive education, mainstream schools need to accommodate local children with disabilities in the same classrooms as their peers.

Inclusive Futures is UK aid's flagship disability inclusion initiative. Since 2018, we have worked to remove barriers to learning for children with disabilities, focusing on primary and pre-primary age children. Our inclusive education projects have operated in five countries: Bangladesh, Kenya, Nepal, Nigeria and Tanzania. Inclusive Futures is a consortium of partners including development and humanitarian organisations, disability inclusion specialists, and experts working in media, research, and academia. We partner with organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs) to improve the lives of people with disabilities, creating real results, and generating learning about what works, what doesn't and why.

We have supported schools to make sustainable, practical and effective preparations for inclusion that acknowledge resource constraints. We found that effective preparation to welcome children with disabilities involves everyone in school and also looks beyond the school walls. Schools can strengthen existing practices with the support of inclusive training and tools developed by inclusive education experts and people with disabilities, and in partnership with government.

The journey to inclusive education takes time, and there are no shortcuts. However, through our projects we found ways that schools can take the first steps to improve inclusive learning opportunities. Schools do not need to wait for perfect conditions to begin enrolling children with disabilities.

Drawing on our findings from delivering Inclusive Futures' education projects, this document discusses **seven practical actions that schools can take to prepare for welcoming children with disabilities into inclusive education.**



Work with the school community to build inclusive attitudes

Collaborate with organisations of people with disabilities on tailored awareness-raising activities that reduce negative attitudes amongst school staff, parents and pupils.

Secure leadership support for inclusion

Gain leadership buy-in early on through careful consultation about inclusion. Embed leadership commitments to inclusion through school policy and procedure.



Build teacher capacity with training and guidance

Work with teachers to bring inclusive approaches into the classroom through expert training. Prepare multiple sessions as early as possible and follow-up with support that acknowledges demanding schedules.



Use inclusive tools that support every child

Respond to diverse learning needs through introducing inclusive classroom materials and individual learning support tools and approaches.



Use data and evidence to meet inclusive learning needs

Set up systems to collect data and evidence about how many children with disabilities are enrolled and attending school and how well they are included in learning.





Make connections and partnerships beyond the school

Work with other sectors and services to address systemic barriers to inclusion and develop school advocacy skills to influence inclusive policies.

Boost investment by using existing available funds

Prioritise careful budgeting, community partnerships and funding advocacy to boost investment in school preparations for inclusion.



This learning report is for anyone involved in supporting schools and planning or delivering an education project: humanitarian and education organisations, government and funding bodies, and organisations of persons with disabilities.

This document is one of three learning reports that explore different stages of the inclusive education journey. See also: identification and outreach, and inclusive teacher training and support.



Our inclusive education projects

Nigeria

- **Support Mainstreaming Inclusion so all Learn Equally (SMILE) in Nigeria**, January 2021 – September 2023

Nepal

- **Strengthening inclusive education in Nepal**, November 2019 – December 2025

Bangladesh

- **Shikhbo Shobai (Everyone Will Learn) project in Bangladesh**, January 2021 – December 2025

Kenya

- **Promoting inclusive early childhood education in Kenya**, February 2020 – December 2023

Tanzania

- **Strengthening inclusive education in Tanzania**, August 2019 – December 2025

Context: Barriers to school inclusion



Inclusion is one of the best things that can happen. Later in life when... seeking employment, [communities] will say ‘oh we had some [people with disabilities] in school, they were bright, they were intelligent’... Inclusive education will encourage total inclusion.

David Okon, OPD representative, Nigeria

Mainstream local schools need to be as inclusive as possible for children with disabilities. Education is a fundamental right for all children¹ that can open the door to a better quality of life, as children with disabilities who attend school are more likely to go on to enjoy good health and to find employment.² Inclusive social interactions in school increase positive attitudes about disability amongst school staff, students, and caregivers, making school inclusion a fundamental part of creating a more inclusive society.³ Education also has an intrinsic value that children with disabilities deserve to enjoy, beyond the achievement of any academic grades or skills.

However, children with disabilities must overcome multiple challenges to be enrolled at school. They can face limiting beliefs about disability, family concerns about safety, and travel obstacles, to name but a few. Despite global commitments⁴ to inclusive education, in most low- and middle-income countries, children with disabilities are more likely to be out of school than any other group of children.⁵ Children with multiple and complex disabilities are particularly likely to be missing from school.⁶

When children with disabilities overcome these challenges and enrol, schools are often underprepared to include them meaningfully in the classroom. On average, children with disabilities learn substantially less.⁷ Many students with identified disabilities are segregated from their peers,⁸ while many other children do not have their disability

acknowledged at school or find that their needs are unsupported.⁹ Children with disabilities also face negative attitudes by staff and students, inaccessible school buildings and learning materials, and teachers who are not equipped for inclusion.¹⁰ It is perhaps unsurprising that children with disabilities are more likely than others to miss classes and to drop out of school.¹¹

Children with disabilities who are otherwise marginalised face further layers of discrimination and disadvantage in school. Students from the poorest households are two times less likely to acquire basic reading and maths skills than those from the richest households, while girls with disabilities are particularly disadvantaged because of social biases around gender and disability.¹² Without an intersectional approach to prepare schools for inclusion, education programmes are leaving many children with disabilities behind.¹³

School preparation to welcome children with disabilities is only one part of the journey towards inclusive education, and similarly this learning piece is one in a series which covers selective topics. Each step in inclusive education requires significant planning and consideration. Before children with disabilities can go to their local school, they must first be identified in the community. Outreach to families is essential so that they can support their child’s enrolment. Children with disabilities must have their learning and other support needs assessed, so that they can be referred to relevant services and so that

schools can make informed decisions about how to support children in the classroom. After preparing to welcome children with disabilities, schools must continue to work on inclusion, in particular supporting teachers so

that they can embed and sustain an inclusive approach to education. All these stages of inclusive education need adequate financing, and identifying funding that can be allocated to inclusion is an ongoing requirement.

Methodology

Our project learning is based on practical experiences of delivery rather than standardised evaluations. This learning summary is the result of a mixed methods learning review:

- Three-day learning workshop with 26 participants, including consortium partners, project management teams and OPD representatives (October 2023).
- Comprehensive local desk review of key project learning reports, identifying school preparation actions identified by the UNICEF Framework for Disability-Inclusive Education, summarised and collated for analysis¹³ (February to March 2024).
- 10 reflection discussions with project management and implementing teams and OPD partners, facilitated by an external consultant (April 2024).
- Three-day learning verification workshop with 26 participants from project management teams, consortium and OPD partners (May 2024).
- 13 key informant interviews with OPD partners, government education officials, teachers, and caregivers involved in project delivery (May to June 2024).

Seven actions to help schools prepare for inclusion

Local schools are at the heart of inclusive education. The UNICEF Framework for Disability -Inclusive Education sets out multiple measures that are needed to support inclusion within and beyond the school boundaries, from accessible learning materials and building design to national education policy.¹⁴ Some measures need long-term and coordinated efforts. Inclusive Futures supported schools to make realistic preparations and lay the groundwork for systemic change towards further inclusion.

1 Work with the school community to build inclusive attitudes

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Without even preparing infrastructure accessibility, what is the attitude of the school, are they willing and ready to receive the learner? This is the most important thing above all others... there must be no segregation, no fear.

Reflection discussion with Inclusive Futures' education project team, Kenya

Schools do not need to wait for all the staff and pupils in their school to become disability inclusion champions before they introduce inclusive tools and approaches. However, we realised early on that a central part of school preparation for inclusion is addressing discriminatory beliefs and negative attitudes about disability.



We held in-depth meetings with leaders and teacher training to develop staff understanding about disability and the value of inclusion. To encourage inclusive socialising between children, we designed inclusive play materials and adapted school social clubs. In collaboration with school leadership teams, we set up inclusive parent groups and held community awareness-raising events to build support for inclusion within schools' local communities.

Attitude change was not fast-paced, but we noticed growing support for inclusive education. In Kenya, focus groups with caregivers and teachers found that attitudes towards inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools became more positive during the project. Participants said their mindset had changed because of taking part in inclusive education activities, such as training and support groups. This suggests that disability-inclusive attitudes and practices

are mutually reinforcing: experiencing successful inclusion in schools helps to reduce stigma against children with disabilities, which generates further support for inclusion.

Schools' attitude-changing work should be done in partnership with people with disabilities, including through Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs). OPDs' prominent role as co-leaders in design and delivery of our inclusive education projects helped to break down negative attitudes. As people with local standing, personal understanding of disability, and lived experience, OPD members were critical in challenging stigma.¹⁵

Key learning: Work with every part of the school community to promote inclusive attitudes, tailoring approaches for different groups.

Case study: Developing inclusive school attitudes in Nigeria

In Kaduna State, Nigeria, we worked with some schools who had very limited experience of inclusive education approaches, so it was important to build support for inclusion and challenge any negative attitudes.

As early as possible, OPD partners met with school management committees that included school staff, religious leaders, caregivers, and student representatives. OPD members presented the benefits of inclusive education and shared personal experiences of learning in a mainstream school to bring the value of inclusive education to life.

Through analysing teachers' existing knowledge, skills and attitudes, we identified where we needed to build teacher confidence and support for inclusion in the

classroom. We then delivered five days of teacher training with the Nigerian Teachers Institute to develop inclusive attitudes and skills, raising awareness about disability rights and inclusive teaching. Training also covered gender-based prejudices that can impact girls with disabilities and the social and economic stigmas that affect marginalised children with disabilities.

Following this, we noticed that learners with disabilities were being bullied. In response, we developed pupil awareness-raising sessions about inclusion and introduced after-school social clubs for children with and without disabilities. By the end of the project, we saw that bullying of children with disabilities had reduced and children with and without disabilities had begun playing together.



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I've received training on inclusive education – we were taught that it is necessary to make education inclusive in such a way that all children will be given opportunity to learn in the same environment regardless of their physical, emotional, social or linguistic capabilities.

It's about including children with disabilities, making them feel part of society – enhancing their social interactions, increasing their learning potential and giving them the right, full support when needed.

Sherifat, teacher, Nigeria

2 Secure leadership support for inclusion

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I'm a leader and teacher with a disability... I experienced challenges when I was a child and a student, especially in obtaining education... It [is] easy for us to create awareness and advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities, as we are living with the same community, and have lived experience.

Moshi Bucheyeki Enos, Treasurer, AMANI Mwalukwa OPD and Headteacher, Tanzania

School leaders – headteachers, parent teacher associations, and management committees – oversee inclusive preparations. A strong commitment to inclusion from the people who lead a school can encourage attitude change amongst others and help to navigate any challenges in implementing inclusion, such as resource limitations. We found that acquiring leadership backing for inclusion was successful when there was opportunity for inclusion experts and OPDs to discuss inclusive education in depth with school leaders. We arranged meetings and workshops to address leaders' questions and concerns, and to consider together the practicalities of inclusion in their classrooms.

Leadership commitment to inclusive education needs to be formalised in school policies and procedures. To strengthen leaders' support for welcoming students with disabilities, we delivered comprehensive training to school management committees on inclusive education essentials, such as disability-inclusive safeguarding and complaint mechanisms. It was also critical



A portrait of Moshi at his OPD's offices in Shinyanga, Tanzania.

to create structures for leadership-level involvement in inclusive education, such as school-based inclusion teams.

For example, in Tanzania, we established school-based inclusion teams that included headteachers, local government officials, caregivers and OPD representatives. The teams were trained to oversee school inclusion measures and scheduled to meet regularly. The inclusion teams' remit was to respond to the needs of children with disabilities in school, to make inclusion plans for the school, and prepare inclusion budgets. Through inclusion teams, leaders stayed updated about issues affecting school inclusion and continued learning about inclusive practices, helping to sustain their commitment.

Key learning: Supportive leaders can accelerate the adoption of inclusion in school.

3 Build teacher capacity with training and guidance

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Before now, in the schools in Jema'a local government, [approximately] 99% were not practising inclusive education. So, the enrolment of pupils with disability was not there... because the teachers were not inclusively educated.

Josephine Paul Dembo, inclusive education desk officer in Jema'a local government, Nigeria



Capacity-strengthening can develop in-service teachers' existing skills and prepare them to include children with disabilities in their classrooms. Teacher training on inclusive education should be delivered as early as possible.

In all our projects, we worked in partnership to design and deliver training with OPDs and government education departments, tailoring content and length to align with government standards. Working with teachers to develop more inclusive approaches to education was a major part of school preparation, and it required ongoing and repeated training and support to sustain changes in teaching.

We identified some key considerations for inclusive teacher training:

- Do not assume prior experience. Inclusive teacher training should strengthen needs-based knowledge, attitudes and skills, such as understanding the concepts of inclusive education, disability rights, and approaches to making classrooms accessible
- Teachers have limited time outside of the classroom. We worked carefully with government and school officials to find time for training
- One-off inclusive teacher training is an essential foundation but is not enough. We found that many teachers requested further guidance, so prepared refresher training and peer mentoring to support teachers in practice
- Consider training quality and reach. We found that equipping teachers to become peer trainers and mentors can help to expand inclusivity training further

In our inclusive education project in Nepal, we reviewed existing teacher training and knowledge and found teachers had very low levels of understanding about inclusion in some areas. Some teachers initially expressed scepticism about inclusion, partly because few children with disabilities were identified in their schools and partly because teachers were reluctant to take on new responsibilities within their busy schedules. To address teacher concerns and strengthen capacity, we used a phased approach across several training sessions. We first highlighted the benefits of inclusive education and its importance to fulfil legal commitments, as well as the need for a proactive approach to making classrooms accessible for students with disabilities, even if none were yet enrolled. Later, we introduced training on practical inclusive education approaches in the classroom. Based on their training, educators gradually began trying out tools like inclusive learning plans and became more confident using them over time.

Key learning: One-off inclusive teacher training is an essential foundation but is not enough. Work with local government and school officials to continually support teachers to embed inclusion in practice.



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Use inclusive tools that support every child

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I love school because I get to learn...
When I grow up, I want to be a policeman, and I want to be a doctor.

Akai, a young boy with a physical disability enrolled at a pre-primary school in Kakuma, Kenya

A child-centred and inclusive approach to education acknowledges that all children can learn and that teaching systems can adapt to the needs of every child. Schools can accommodate diverse learning needs by consulting with children with disabilities and their caregivers, using inclusive learning materials, assistive devices and individual learning plans, and placing learning assistants in classrooms.

Working alongside children with disabilities and their families can ensure that school preparation measures incorporate their needs. For example, we conducted home visits, held focus group discussions, and consulted parent-teacher associations.

Equipping teachers with additional skills to design and use inclusive teaching materials, can help them tailor learning for every child. For example, we supported teachers to create large colourful alphabet letters and bright tactile abacuses to support inclusive literacy and maths education. Children with disabilities may need specifically adapted communication materials, so we also funded assistive equipment for schools such as writing aids and braille readers. We trained teachers to use this equipment and supported schools to make plans for maintenance. We found that many teachers explored using inclusive teaching materials, but it is critical to offer in-service problem-solving and support to facilitate their use. Some teachers faced obstacles to safely storing inclusive teaching materials and protecting them from weather, while others found that time pressures made it challenging to explore using inclusive learning tools in the classroom, so they reverted to using their traditional tools.

Part of a child-centred approach includes schools planning how they will meet each child's identified learning needs and track their progress. We worked with teachers to use an Individualised Education Plan (IEP) for this purpose, building on their existing skills in class planning. An IEP is a document created by teachers alongside the student and their caregivers that sets out a child's disabilities

and needs, agreed learning interventions, and how to monitor progress. IEPs helped educators to overcome uncertainties by providing specific plans of action for teaching each child with a disability. However, many teachers requested additional assistance with IEPs. Some needed more support to assess and understand pupils' specific learning needs, and others found it burdensome to maintain IEP record-keeping within busy schedules. We explored making shortened and online versions of IEPs so they were easier to implement and maintain.

One challenge of a child-centred approach is high pupil-teacher ratios. This restricts teachers' time to accommodate the individual learning needs of children with disabilities. In some schools, we funded Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) to work alongside teachers to adapt learning materials and spend dedicated time supporting children with disabilities. This personal attention dramatically improved learning engagement. However, ongoing financing for LSAs was a challenge. We found that in some cases, government funding for school inclusion was available, but required detailed understanding to access and apply for it.



A counting abacus made with used bottle tops and a wooden frame.

Key learning: Schools can accommodate diverse learning needs by consulting with children with disabilities and their caregivers and tailoring learning tools accordingly.

Case study: Preparing inclusive teaching materials in Nepal

In Kalika Municipality and Bharatpur Metropolitan City in Nepal, an important area where schools needed support to prepare for including children with disabilities was in teachers' use of teaching and learning materials. Alongside OPDs, we co-delivered training and guidance for teachers in over 150 schools.

We delivered training based on **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** principles, building on teachers' existing skills to present the curriculum in a more varied way. UDL approaches to curriculum design create flexible paths to learning to accommodate all students and their individual learning needs. We organised workshops on developing low-cost teaching and learning materials with locally available materials using a UDL approach. During these sessions, teachers developed visual and tactile learning materials to support literacy, numeracy, and early development. We also involved students in making inclusive teaching materials to support positive pupil involvement with inclusive learning.



Teachers in Nepal during a workshop to create tactile learning materials.



In response to demand, we also funded smart TVs for 13 schools so that teachers could use digital audio-visual learning materials. Teachers found this helped to support diverse learning needs and to develop the digital literacy of children with disabilities, which is particularly important for children in poorer communities who cannot access these technologies at home.

However, teachers faced challenges in putting this into practice. Teachers had large class sizes of 40 to 60 students, reducing their time to prepare approaches using new materials. Some teachers also misunderstood UDL as an additional activity, rather than a new mainstream teaching approach. To help teachers embed new approaches, we worked in partnership with government education officials to establish an inclusive mentoring scheme led by local retired teachers and education experts.

5 Use data and evidence to meet inclusive learning needs

Schools should be prepared to collect data and evidence that helps them understand what is and isn't working to include children with disabilities in education. Education is an inherent right and has intrinsic benefits for all children, so inclusion cannot be fully measured by tracking educational attainment or grades of children with disabilities.

Recording information about the number of children with disabilities who are attending school is an important baseline. Many schools had not recorded how many children with disabilities were enrolled and we worked together to develop or strengthen data collection systems. We supported schools to introduce disability screening through training school staff in using **the Washington**

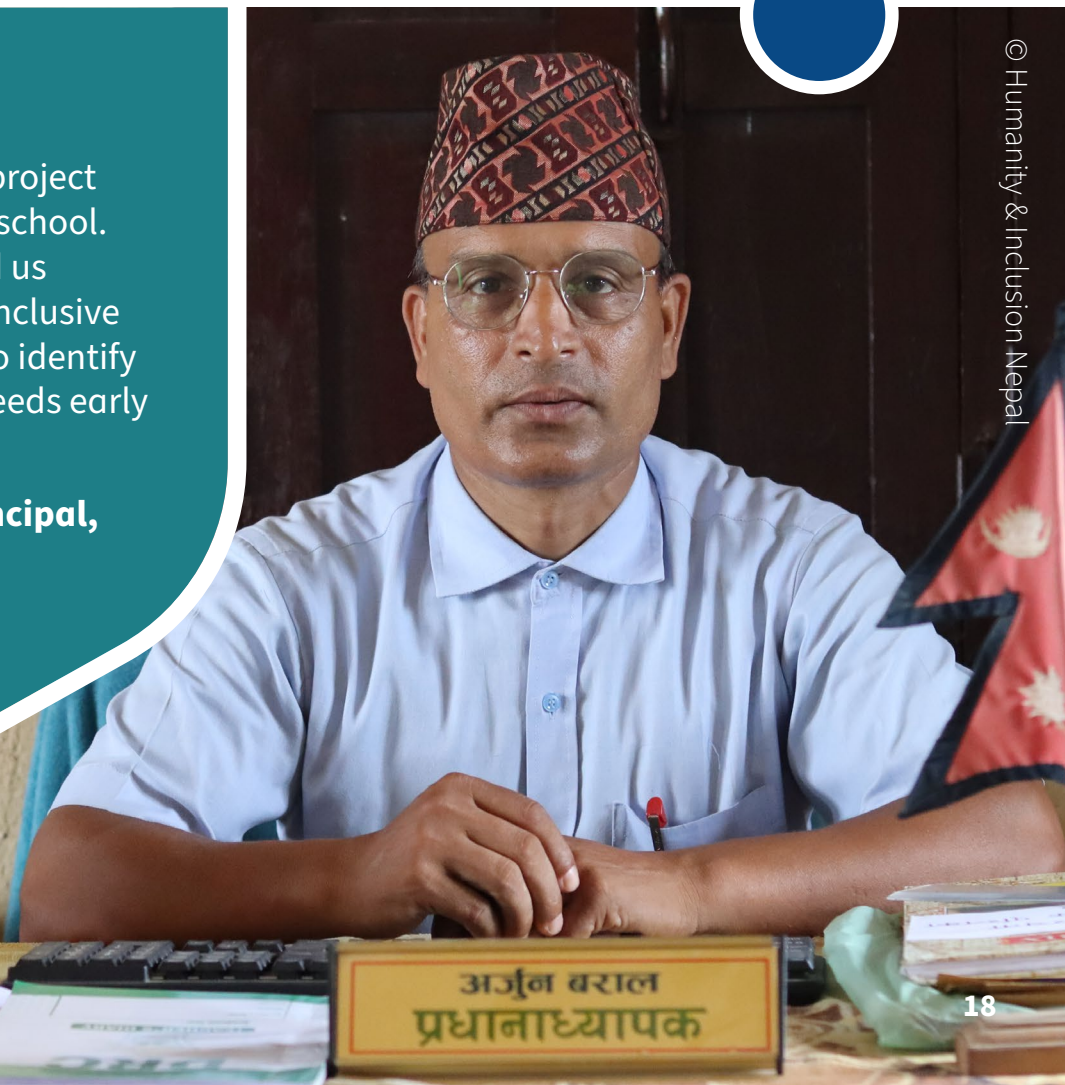
Group/UNICEF Child Functioning Module (CFM) sets of questions.¹⁶ The Washington Group questions measure the extent to which children experience functional limitations amounting to a disability. The questions are not traditionally used as a tool for disability screening on an individual level and so have some limitations for this purpose. However, they are a helpful school-level tool and should be used to identify children who may have a disability and refer them for further medical and educational assessment. All our projects found the questions helpful to support data collection about the number of children with disabilities enrolling in school.

Reinforcing schools' existing record-keeping practices so that they have an accurate understanding of how frequently children with disabilities are attending school is also important. We found that schools were experiencing challenges in capturing routine educational data, so we provided training on efficient record-keeping to support information capture about inclusion.

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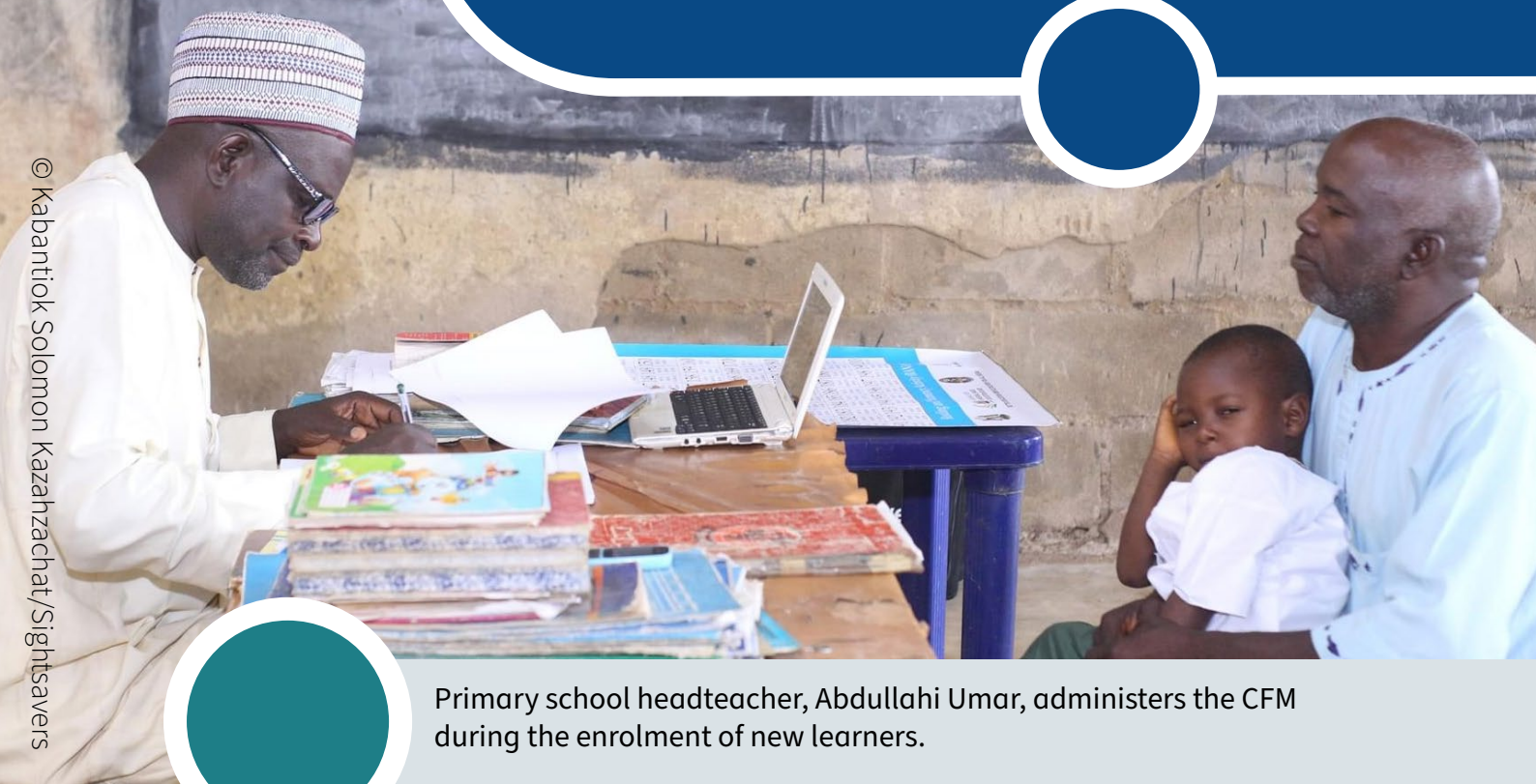
The inclusive education project is very important for my school. This project has provided us with training related to inclusive education, allowing us to identify students' abilities and needs early and teach accordingly.

Arjun Baral, school principal, Bharatpur, Nepal



For example, in Nigeria, we trained school administrators, leaders, and teachers to carry out screening for children with disabilities using the CFM. Schools reported that this process of identifying children with disabilities supported them as a first step in gathering information to support children's different learning needs. One project school incorporated the screening into standard enrolment procedures.

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Primary school headteacher, Abdullahi Umar, administers the CFM during the enrolment of new learners.

Spotlight on wellbeing: To go beyond measuring conventional markers of attainment for children with disabilities, our research partner, the Institute of Development Studies, developed and piloted a bespoke wellbeing tool in three Nigerian schools.¹⁷ The tool was designed to enable children with disabilities to safely share their experiences about interacting with teachers, other pupils, and in the wider school environment. Our project team found that the wellbeing tool enabled children with disabilities, as well as their caregivers and teachers, to give feedback about what was and wasn't working, supporting data collection about challenges and successes that could improve inclusion.

Key learning: Strengthen schools' capacity to collect and use data to track and support the inclusion of children with disabilities

6 Make connections and partnerships beyond the school

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Parents, school management committee, and the community – we need to work hard in order to make the community inclusive for all children with disabilities.

Aananda Raj Sapkota, secondary school headteacher, Nepal

Schools need to collaborate with other sectors and services to address systemic barriers to inclusion. Wider social and economic factors impact inclusive education, especially in resource-restricted environments. Our work was affected by the following:

- Poverty: caregivers prioritise livelihood activities rather than education
- Safety net gaps: challenges in accessing disability benefits
- Healthcare limits: cannot access needed medical services
- Remoteness: rural and isolated families face travel barriers

Addressing these factors requires system-wide work that is beyond the limits of a single school project or education programme. However, to maximise inclusion within classrooms, such challenges should be anticipated as part of school preparation activities. We mapped relevant services and referral pathways, and trained school staff to link families with any needed wraparound support. Not all health and social services were fully set up for disability inclusion, but links and referrals to health and social services helped to address the broader needs



of children with disabilities. This ensured that schools were not working in isolation towards inclusion.

A school will struggle to become disability inclusive if the wider political environment does not support inclusion: education funding allocations, political leadership, and national policy can all have an impact. It is not realistic for schools to alter the policy context in which they operate on their own nor in the short-term. However, schools can develop knowledge and partnerships to influence future inclusion. We developed relationships between school leaders and relevant government officials through collaboration on school preparation activities and identified champions for inclusive education at local government level. We ensured that school preparation work aligned with relevant government strategies and trained school leaders in advocacy so they could seek further policy commitments in support of disability-inclusive education.

Key learning: Address barriers to inclusion beyond the school by collaborating across sectors.

In Tanzania, children with disabilities faced multiple intersecting barriers to inclusion in school. To help overcome these barriers, we supported communities in our project area to establish an Education Support Resource and Assessment Centre (ESRAC) in a local primary school. OPDs encouraged caregivers to bring their children to have their learning needs assessed by a trained multi-sector team, including government doctors and social welfare officers. The team also referred children with disabilities to medical services and identified if the family needed other support. Some families of children with complex disabilities could not afford medical care that would support their children to attend school, such as surgery. To help address these challenges in the shorter-term, school preparation included establishing parent groups to help link caregivers with income opportunities, such as government loans. As a result of this close partnership work with government, the Tanzanian Ministry of Education invited the project's inclusive education partnership team to take part in a review supporting the National Strategy for Inclusive Education 2021-2026. In addition, ESRACs started being established at schools across the country.



Helena and her son Christopher outside an ESRAC centre in Misungwi, Tanzania.

Case study: Home-based education in Bangladesh

Not all preparations for inclusive education need to take place in the school environment. During our outreach with families and communities, we identified some children with complex disabilities who were not able to immediately attend mainstream school. We engaged these children in personalised home-based education with the goal to prepare them for enrolment into mainstream schools.



Community outreach in our inclusive education project in Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, we supported over 150 children with complex disabilities to receive an education at home and prepare for school. We approached identified families to discuss inclusive education and gain consent to enrol their children into home-based learning. Our trained Home-Based Education Facilitators then prepared an Individualised Education Plan, based on an assessment of each child's functional limitations and learning needs. During regular home visits, facilitators offered dedicated learning support and helped children to develop essential literacy, numeracy, and daily living skills. We involved caregivers in the education plan, and gave training and guidance so they could also facilitate their children's learning at home. With the support of education facilitators, over half of these children later enrolled into mainstream school.

In Bangladesh, we found that collaborating across sectors greatly increased the benefits for the children with complex disabilities in home-based education. We referred children to health services for further medical assessment and rehabilitation, and linked families with state disability benefits and social services that would support their child's education. By partnering with government and local organisations we were able to mobilise additional funds for assistive devices, teaching and learning materials, and healthcare visits and by partnering with OPDs, their members were able to meet families at home and offer ongoing advice about inclusive education.



Children take part in an activity for World Sign Language Day.

7 Boost investment with existing available funds

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All children are equal, so it is better children with disability get an education like other children, and this responsibility is given to the government and other education stakeholders... through collaboration with community leaders.

Moshi Bucheyeki Enos, Treasurer, AMANI Mwalukwa OPD and Headteacher, Tanzania

Cost-effective school inclusion measures are possible. Prioritise careful budgeting, strategic community partnerships and funding advocacy to boost investment in school preparations to include children with disabilities. Inclusive education brings widespread social, economic and health benefits, which means that it represents significant value for money from an equity perspective. However, it requires financial investment. Schools should be prepared appropriately for the relevant costs of inclusion measures. Our project budgets included:

- Purchase of specialised equipment, teaching materials and assistive technologies
- Accessibility modifications to physical infrastructure
- Hiring support staff and research or training consultants
- Administration, travel and logistics
- Transportation services for students with disabilities and caregivers

The anticipated cost of accessibility and inclusion can be a concern for schools, particularly in resource-restricted environments. However, our experience is that inclusion rarely costs as much as people think and that affordable adaptations are possible.¹⁸ We worked with schools on lower-cost approaches to inclusive preparations, for example making links with existing government support services for children with disabilities rather than hiring additional in-school support staff. Schools may be eligible for additional funding from government or non-profit grant-makers to introduce accessibility and inclusion adaptations. We worked with schools to identify and access available sources of income to pay for expenses such as infrastructure modifications and assistive learning aids.

An Inclusive Futures project school in Kakuma, Kenya



In Bangladesh, we coordinated with the local government on school preparation activities, such as teacher training, and aligned our education work with their priorities. We advocated for the reallocation of education funding towards inclusion by explaining the benefits of inclusive adaptations for the learning of all children, and the longer-term cost-effectiveness of the investment. The local authorities in Sirajganj agreed to release dedicated financing for disability inclusion measures for 1500 government primary schools in their district as a portion of an existing school-level improvement funding stream. We informed schools about how to access this funding for a wide range of inclusion measures, such as infrastructure improvements and accessible teaching and learning materials. For example, one primary school used the funds to build an additional railing to support an accessible ramp.

Across our education projects, we trained school management teams in financial management and resource mobilisation and worked with schools to prepare inclusive budgeting plans to ensure finance for their inclusion activities would be sustainable. We also collaborated with local organisations, leaders, and governments on school preparation – building community buy-in for school inclusion that generated financial and in-kind support.

For example, our collaboration with the wider school community on accessibility audits helped to boost funding for school infrastructure improvements. In our inclusive education project in Tanzania, we audited the schools in partnership with the school management committee, OPDs and local education officers. Audits review areas such as school classrooms, recreation areas and hygiene facilities, recommending and prioritising what is needed so that children with disabilities can access school and move around safely. The resulting audit reports were shared with local government authorities and analysed together, and this resulted in a joint plan to make needed improvements. Local government budgets did not cover all required renovations in the short term. However, community members who were engaged in the audit process made financial contributions to enable priority improvements. We used the audits to support school management committees to develop an advocacy approach, with assistance from OPD partners, aimed at obtaining government budget allocations for inclusive school renovations in the future.

Key learning: Address barriers to inclusion beyond the school by collaborating across sectors.

Manita (in yellow) sings along with her peers in class.



Conclusion

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Educating children [with disabilities] like Manita is incredibly important. Even if they haven't had the chance to study before, they can still learn so much... Seeing her happy and engaged at school brings me so much joy. She's thriving and really enjoys going to school now... [this] has brought significant positive changes to Manita's life.

Manju, parent of Manita, a girl with disabilities attending school in Nepal

Every child deserves to fulfil their right to go to school and learn and play alongside their peers. Through our education projects, we've shown that children with and without disabilities can thrive in mainstream schools where everyone is welcomed and supported. Inclusion takes time and collaboration, however, there is no reason for schools to delay in introducing measures that increase learning opportunities for children with disabilities.

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