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LEARNING FROM THE MULTI-COUNTRY STUDY ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION (MCSIE) IN NEPAL

A SUMMARY OF INTERIM FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE MCSIE LED BY INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS (IDP) IN PARTNERSHIP WITH KATHMANDU UNIVERSITY

NOVEMBER 2022

INTRODUCTION

The Multi-Country Study on Inclusive Education (MCSIE) seeks to derive lessons about what works, for whom, and in what context to sustainably advance teaching and learning outcomes for children with disabilities in three countries: Cambodia, Nepal, and Malawi. USAID and its partners will use the MCSIE evaluation to inform adaptations to its inclusive education activities in the target countries, to plan for new inclusive education programming globally and to provide technical assistance to partner countries on disability inclusive education.

Specifically, MCSIE examines five themes:
- The overall **process** of setting up an inclusive education system
- Efforts to **screen and identify** learners with disabilities
- **Teacher training** models to build educator capacity
- The activity's **inclusive instructional approaches** for early grade reading (EGR)
- **Unintended consequences** resulting from the activity

This evidence summary draws upon key findings from the Multi-Country Study on Inclusive Education (MCSIE) Nepal Interim Report to highlight promising strategies in inclusive education for USAID and its partners, as well as other global stakeholders who would like to learn from the evidence generated.

NEPAL READING FOR ALL (R4A)

In Nepal, MCSIE is evaluating Reading for All (R4A). R4A focuses on improving reading outcomes among children with disabilities in grades 1– 3 and is implemented in ten districts across Nepal. Since its inception in 2018, R4A interventions have included (1) screening children to identify (and subsequently support) those with disabilities or functional limitations, (2) building the capacity of Government of Nepal (GoN) education officials at federal, provincial, and local levels and local disabled persons organization (DPO[1]) staff to support disability inclusive education, (3) training school administrators and teachers in inclusive instructional approaches for reading, and (4) developing and pretesting adapted versions of the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) for learners who are deaf or hard of hearing, are blind or have low vision, or have intellectual disabilities.

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[1] Disabled persons organizations (DPOs), also known as organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), are civil society organizations run by and for persons with disabilities.

INTERIM FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS IN NEPAL

The MCSIE evaluation team, led by Inclusive Development Partners in collaboration with Kathmandu University, examined activity documents and collected data through interviews, surveys, and observations—remotely, due to COVID-19—from November 2019 through July 2021 to produce this set of interim findings. When international travel became possible in April 2022, a team visited Nepal to cross-check the interim findings through discussions with R4A staff, partners, and stakeholders within the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST). It is important to note that the activity is ongoing and, due to pandemic-related delays, at the time of this evaluation school-level instructional support was just commencing. As such, the interim findings are focused on promising strategies and areas for further investigation related to process, identification, and training.

PROMISING IDENTIFICATION STRATEGIES

Under this theme MCSIE asks **"What methods worked best to identify learners with disabilities?"**

RECOMMENDATION 1:   WORK WITH DISABLED PERSONS ORGANIZATIONS TO MAP AND UNDERSTAND REFERRAL PROCESSES AND SERVICES.

Key informant interviews reveal that partnering with DPOs that are already familiar with services in their communities is an effective way to engage DPO leaders, as well as efficiently map services. One DPO staff person describes how the local government was very surprised by the screening data, and their organization was able to use the data to successfully lobby local government officials to contribute public funds toward assistive devices. Another shares how they were able to successfully help children and their families apply for disability benefits. The DPO referral process for learners who were screened as having a potential disability is ongoing and this will be further explored in subsequent reports.

RECOMMENDATION 2: ALLOW ADEQUATE TIME TO TEST SCREENING TOOLS AND PLAN ALTERNATIVE SCREENING METHODS.

The Washington Group/UNICEF Child Functioning Model (CFM) is an effective census-level tool, but due to new use in classrooms, its accuracy as a school–level tool must be established. The original technical verification (TV) process conducted by R4A did not demonstrate validity. Due to several methodological challenges[2], a new TV of the screening tool took place in May 2022 and results are pending. The design of the activity at the solicitation stage did not allow R4A to explore whether alternative screening methods (such as vision or hearing screening) might be more accurate or even appropriate to the Nepali context. Future education activities that plan to obtain data on learners with disabilities, through screening or other means, should plan ahead of time to identify appropriate tools. Activity timelines and budgets should allow for validity testing of tools, including the CFM, within local contexts and be given the flexibility to pivot if a tool is presenting challenges.

RECOMMENDATION 3: CAREFULLY CONSIDER IMPACT OF SCREENING DATA ON STAKEHOLDERS.

Existence of screening data produced by R4A has significantly raised awareness and changed behavior among school and government personnel, facilitating needed support to children with disabilities to attend school. However, it is important to note that this awareness also increases the demand for resources to provide that support; governments, schools, DPOs, and other stakeholders need to be prepared for that impact.

PROMISING TRAINING STRATEGIES

Under this theme MCSIE asks **"What training model(s) worked best to provide teachers with the resources and support they need to best meet the needs of learners with disabilities?"**

RECOMMENDATION 4: DEVELOP TRAINING PLANS WITH EARLY GRADE READING AND DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE EDUCATION EXPERTS, ENSURE MATERIALS THOROUGHLY COVER DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE APPROACHES TO LITERACY.

R4A teacher training plans were developed with technical support from an international expert in EGR and adult-learning approaches and in collaboration with the inclusive education section of CEHRD. As a result of this collaboration, the activity introduced new pedagogies to teachers, while using lively and interactive modes of training, such as case examples, quizzes, and opportunities for group discussion, that participants viewed as effective. Developing teacher training content in collaboration with the local government resulted in ownership of the training packages.

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[2] Methodological challenges included design challenges (the sample size of learners with disabilities was too small and flagged learners were only screened for the disability for which they had been flagged), implementation challenges (the CFM was implemented not as a parent questionnaire as intended but as mini screening assessments by teachers) and analysis challenges (incorrect statistical tests were used to calculate reliability; tool sensitivity and specificity were not calculated).

Nevertheless, while the training materials provide basic information defining disability and raising awareness that children with disabilities should be included in schools, MCSIE found that training materials do not clearly or directly provide the inclusive teaching strategies for inclusion to take place. Ongoing training under R4A has begun to strengthen these connections and MCSIE will continue to monitor the results. The full suite of training packages is set for final review and validation by the MoEST in October 2022. If approved, they will become official elements of the teacher professional development system.

RECOMMENDATION 5: INVOLVE DISABLED PERSONS ORGANIZATIONS IN TEACHER TRAINING.

For the teacher training, R4A collaborated with DPOs, whose staff led the training session that introduced disabilities and provided logistical support. This involvement brought important local perspective and lived experience to the training because DPOs could describe the local context of the disability community and provide stories or examples based on their longstanding presence. During KIIs with DPOs some participants recommended deeper engagement of DPO team members as paid, permanent staff (in addition to staff hired only for the program) to provide more continuity and smoother transitions.

RECOMMENDATION 6: LEARN FROM AND ADDRESS TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF DISABILITY.

Training provided teachers with opportunities to discuss their perceptions of disability. Evaluation data shows a statistically significant improvement in teacher perceptions about the ability of children with physical disabilities to learn to read in regular schools and teachers reported feeling more prepared to teach those students after completing the training. However, no statistically significant improvements were found in teacher perceptions related to children with intellectual disabilities, and further investigation into strategies for improving such perceptions is recommended.

PROMISING PROCESS STRATEGIES

Under this theme MCSIE asks **"What worked in the process of setting up an efficient, effective, and sustainable system to focus on improving the quality of education for learners with disabilities?"**

RECOMMENDATION 7: EMBED TECHNICAL STAFF WITHIN MINISTRIES.

R4A embeds technical staff in the Inclusive Education section of the Center for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD) of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST). Key informant interviews revealed that embedding staff within Government of Nepal (GoN) offices has been mutually beneficial. Embedding staff has contributed to the activity's efforts to expand the GoN's existing capacity related to disability-inclusive education, which may lead to improved sustainability. Embedding staff has also facilitated both formal and informal communication between the activity and the GON, and provides activity staff with real-time insights into how the government conceives of supporting and expanding disability-inclusive education in Nepal.

RECOMMENDATION 8:   ENGAGE DPOS AS IMPLEMENTATION PARTNERS.

The program goes beyond consultations by fully engaging DPOs as national and district-level implementation partners. These partnerships enable R4A to benefit from DPOs' decades of experience within their respective communities, including their existing networks, relationships, lived experience, and valuable knowledge of local needs and resources. For example, some DPOs have been able to successfully advocate for the local government in their district to add a budget line to continue supporting early screening activities after the activity ends. Over time, R4A's central leadership has made an effort to transfer greater levels of responsibility to DPO partners. In turn, DPO partners express satisfaction with their engagement and feel it has strengthened their organizations.

RECOMMENDATION 9:   ENSURE DIVERSE REPRESENTATION OF STAFF AND SUPPLEMENT KNOWLEDGE GAPS WITH TECHNICAL GUIDANCE AND EXPERTISE.

Having large percentages of activity staff with disabilities or with close personal connections to persons with disabilities are strong elements of R4A. It provides strong representation of persons with disabilities in the program and is consistent with the international disability community motto of "nothing about us without us." MCSIE also finds that although staff have disability inclusion experience, many individuals have limited background in the technical area of disability-inclusive education. The program includes technical guidance and expertise in disability-inclusive education to supplement those knowledge gaps and uses training and field visits to develop DPO-partner capacity.

RECOMMENDATION 10: INSTITUTE A RESPONSIVE APPROACH TO PROJECT MANAGEMENT.

The initial solicitation contained many exciting and interesting elements intended to move disability inclusive education forward in Nepal. However, evaluation participants express that the timeline and budget are limited for such an ambitious scope of work (SOW), and COVID-related delays created further challenges to implementation. While a two-day co-creation workshop with the government and other stakeholders was included, it was held after the budget and SOW were already developed, making it challenging to shift scope or add activities in response to stakeholder ideas or requests.

Disability-inclusive education, as a burgeoning field, requires flexibility to learn and adapt in all aspects. USAID has indicated that, in hindsight, a less prescriptive solicitation would have been better suited to the field and activity objectives. Establishing a flexible approach to project management at the outset can allow activities to be responsive to the changing needs of the program.

SUMMARY

The findings and recommendations described in this brief reflect what we are learning from the MCSIE at the point of the interim report. While not conclusive, these interim findings are already surfacing compelling cross-cutting themes and areas for additional research.

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

Taking a broad look at the work in Nepal—as well as across all three MCSIE countries—a few overarching themes stand out in the findings. These include:

- The need for technical expertise in content areas (e.g., disability-inclusive EGR instruction, screening, assessments) to be embedded across the activity to ensure best practices are integrated into programming.
- The value of robust partnerships with DPOs in all areas of disability-inclusive education programming.
- The importance of early testing of tools and planning to mitigate process breakdowns due to new screening and identification systems.
- The need to ensure disability-inclusive pedagogy is embedded in all literacy education (such as taking a universal design for learning approach[3] to avoid addressing disability in isolation and limiting the reach of disability-specific approaches.

Recognition of these key ideas can inform and enhance programming in all areas of inclusive education.

AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND PROGRAM CONSIDERATIONS

In addition to providing valuable insight into good practices, MCSIE is also bringing to light areas where further study is recommended for all who are engaged in disability-inclusive education. The following areas are suggested for continued investigation.

- Continue to examine the use of the Child Functioning Module (CFM) in the school setting, to verify the tool's sensitivity, validity and specificity and identify needs for localization and/or adaptation of the tool.
- Evaluate the use of government databases to track educational measurement, including disability screening data. Identify specific contextual needs and build budgets accordingly.
- Engage in deeper analysis of data sets generated through use of adapted EGRA for what we can learn about the instrument and the adaptations.
- Examine the benefits and approaches for successful DPO engagement as partners, including the impact of engagement on program sustainability.
- Investigate teacher training strategies to better support the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities.

For additional information on any of the findings and recommendations in this document, or on the MCSIE in general, please see [Learning from the Multi-Country Study on Inclusive Education](#) on USAID's Education Links site.

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[3] Universal design for learning is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn. Instead of changing the learner, UDL aims to change the design of learning environments to reduce barriers so that all learners can engage in rigorous, meaningful learning.