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**MAPPING AND RECOMMENDATIONS
ON DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE EDUCATION
IN EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Overview of inclusive education

Every child has the right to learn. Inclusion and equity in education are at the core of the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular Sustainable Development Goal No. 4. International conventions and frameworks from recent decades, notably Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948),¹ Convention against Discrimination in Education,² Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)³ and the World Conference on Education for All (EFA)⁴ acknowledge that education is a basic right and no child, regardless of background, should be left behind.

While the concept of inclusive education is about all learners, children with disabilities* are among the most excluded from education⁵ and at least 240 million children, around the world, have a disability.⁶ Recent evidence confirms that globally, children with disabilities, especially those with severe disabilities, are disproportionately less likely to attend school than children without disabilities at primary and secondary levels. When they do access school, they are more likely to repeat a grade or drop out.⁷

In 2006, the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) signaled a growing global commitment to an inclusive education system at all levels for all learners.⁸ Ten years later, General Comment No. 4 (CG4) to CRPD Article 24 strengthened the shift towards more disability-inclusive systems by providing governments with a concrete definition and strategic guideposts for implementation. GC4 conceptualizes inclusion as a process of reforming policies, practices, and cultures at all levels and the provision of reasonable accommodations within general classrooms to include diverse students meaningfully and effectively.⁹

GC4 conceptualizes inclusion as a process of reforming policies, practices, and cultures at all levels and the provision of reasonable accommodations within general classrooms to include diverse students meaningfully and effectively.¹⁰ For governments to progressively realize inclusion for children with disabilities, the thinking around disability needs to shift from a traditional medical perspective to a more rights-based social model.

Purpose of the mapping

The UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office commissioned the study to:

1. Map the progress of countries and UNICEF programmes in Eastern and Southern Africa region (ESAR) in advancing inclusive quality education for all children, with a particular focus on children with disabilities at pre-primary, primary, and lower secondary levels.
2. Undertake a review of inclusive quality education policies and practices in ESAR to identify successful practices, innovative approaches, and gaps.
3. Inform the development of a roadmap for UNICEF's regional work on inclusive quality education, focusing on the rights and needs of children with disabilities based on the experiences in the countries. The roadmap will outline key action points to advance the inclusive education agenda in the region, highlighting priority areas and countries where support is most needed.

* This report uses 'children with disabilities'. The research team advocates moving away from using language that promotes 'special needs' and 'special education'. However, if government documentations use such language, such terminologies are retained.

Research design and methodology

The overall methodology employed a mixed-methods approach drawing on key background documents at country and regional levels, a small-scale survey, and focus group discussions. While the concept of inclusive education is broad and encompasses all children, the mapping focused on children with disabilities of pre-primary, primary, and lower secondary school age. Geographically, the mapping covered all 21 countries in ESAR including (1) Angola, (2) Botswana, (3) Burundi, (4) Comoros, (5) Eritrea, (6) Eswatini, (7) Ethiopia, (8) Kenya, (9) Lesotho, (10) Madagascar, (11) Malawi, (12) Mozambique, (13) Namibia, (14) Rwanda, (15) Somalia, (16) South Africa, (17) South Sudan, (18) the United Republic of Tanzania, (19) Uganda, (20) Zambia, and (21) Zimbabwe.

The theoretical framework is informed by the instructive guidance provided by General Comment No. 4 to Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in establishing inclusive education systems. The framework outlines the conditions necessary to fulfilling the rights of children with disabilities to education, through four main domains and dimensions or key change strategies:

1. Enabling environment. This includes conditions that facilitate an inclusive education system including legal framework, sector plan and financing, the

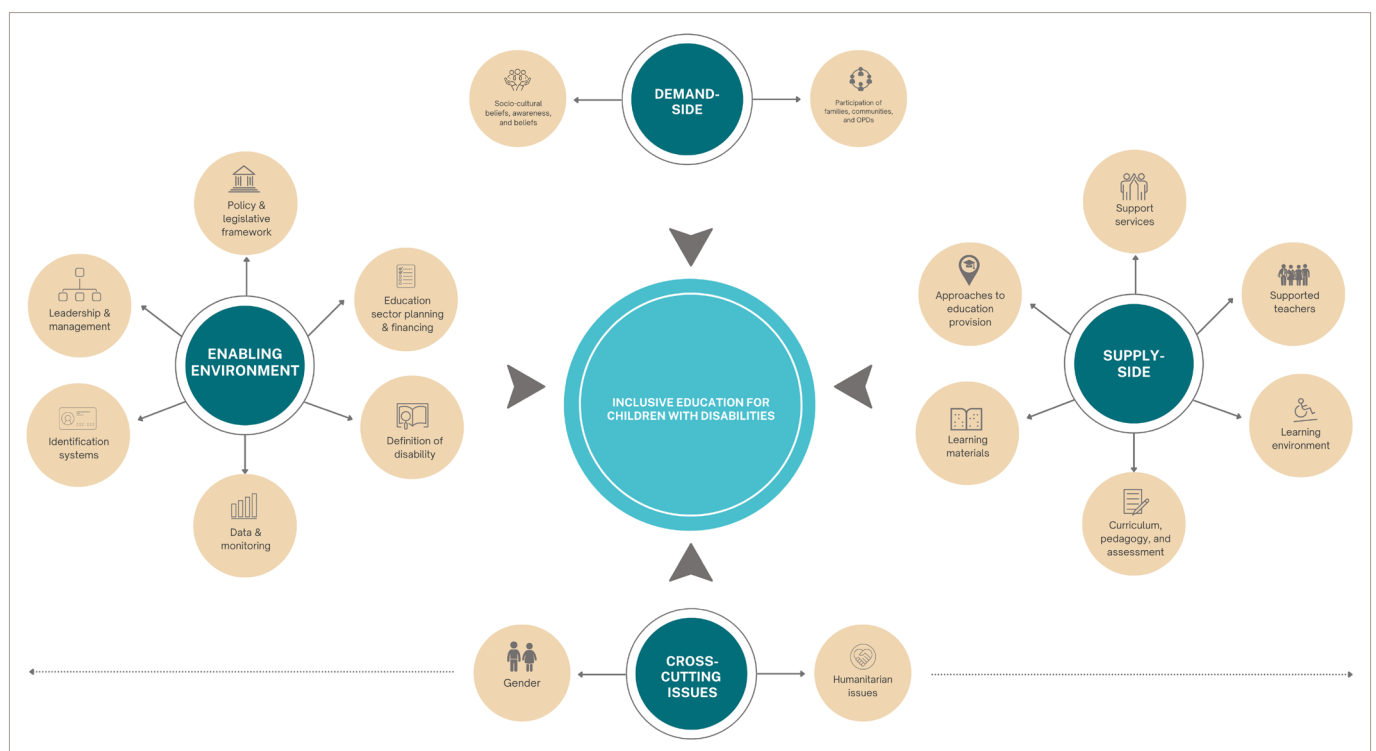
conceptualization of disability, data on children with disabilities, and governance.

2. Supply. This domain focuses on the availability and accessibility of educational and support services for children with disabilities.

3. Demand. Demand-side conditions pertain to social norms, awareness and attitudes, and participation of persons with disabilities and their families in inclusive education.

4. Cross-cutting issues. In this study, cross cutting issues look at gender and humanitarian situations that, in interaction with disability, cause further exclusion of children with disabilities from quality education.

Data collection included a systematic literature review including relevant legislative frameworks, policy documents and strategic plans, prominent global, regional, and country reports; small scale online surveys with government (39 respondents) and non-state actors (83 respondents); national multi-stakeholder workshops; and focus group discussions (FGD) with youth with disabilities (63 boys and girls with disabilities) at the secondary level in six countries, where FGDs were feasible to conduct. It should be noted that the mapping was designed to not include empirical research at the school level, hence, cannot ascertain the quality of educational provisions for children with disabilities, unless documented in published literature.



Key Findings

1. Enabling Environment

1.1. Policy and legislative framework

There is an increasing commitment in the ESA region to safeguard the rights of persons with disabilities. Although a specific reference to persons with disabilities is lacking, the constitutions of all countries recognise the rights of all citizens to have access to equal and quality education. There is also a strong emphasis on protecting persons with disabilities against discrimination, violence, and exploitation in the constitutions of a third of the countries. Non-discrimination, and anti-violence and exploitation clauses in the constitution hold government and development partners accountable to take strategic actions to promote equity and ensure equal treatment for persons with disabilities in different spheres of life.

The promotion of inclusive education as an educational approach for children with disabilities is also evident in the region. This is a promising initial step towards meeting the goal of ensuring children with disabilities have access to quality inclusive education. Some countries in the region promote inclusive education through disability and education laws and policies. The definitions of inclusive education in the region are gradually including other marginalised groups and are not only focused on persons with disabilities. However, special education remains the most common educational approach for children with disabilities based on most disability and education laws and policies.

1.2. Education sector plan and financing

The review has found limited focus on children with disabilities in education sector analysis reports. Nevertheless, most countries in the region have education sector plans (ESP) focusing on improving educational access for children with disabilities and ensuring their participation in school. Across the region, significant focus is placed on raising teacher quality as 17 out of 21 countries included supporting teachers'

continuous professional development in their ESPs, which is an integral step toward improving the quality of education.

Some areas critical in identifying and sustaining appropriate support services for learners with disabilities are missing in most sector plans. For instance, establishing or improving disability identification systems is not a priority in most ESPs, although this could be within the purview of the health or social service sectors. Support services for children with disabilities and coordination and partnership among government institutions and other stakeholders for inclusive education are also often not highlighted. There is also a need to consider the potential impact of crises and emergencies on the education of children with disabilities in sector planning. Only one country has explicitly included goals to develop emergency response plans considering the needs of marginalised children in their ESP.

Financial data specific to inclusive education is often limited; hence, the study cannot conclude the extent to which inclusive education is prioritized in government budgets. However, based on the desk review, inclusive education budget allocations are substantially below international standards. Across the region, funding is usually directed toward providing learning materials, capacity-building of teachers, and improving accessibility of school infrastructure and facilities. In some countries, resources allocated for inclusive education are strengthened through the support development partners.

1.3. Definition of disability

Definitions of disability in education policies and plans signal a shift towards a more rights-based approach to disability. Based on reviewed documents, majority of countries have references to both social and medical models of disability, which suggests that the social model definition is not yet consistent across the policy landscape and that there is a lack of universal understanding of the model. However,

the conceptualization of disability is evolving since all countries have defined disability using the social model in one or more legislation and census report. This emerging shift in the understanding of disability is consistent with the progression of the ESA region in disability-inclusive education programming.

In many countries, national data collection systems such as population censuses and household surveys are yet to be aligned with the definition of disability based on their respective legislation. Some countries need to ensure consistency in adopting the CRPD definition across their legislation as well. Despite having social-model-based definitions of disability, segregatory approaches to education are still the most common practice.

1.4. Data and monitoring

Approximately ten per cent of the world's children with disabilities are in Eastern and Southern Africa.¹¹ The extent of disability prevalence is unknown¹² and available data from census reports seriously underestimate the proportion of the population with disabilities to be at an average of 6.7 per cent, lower than the estimate by the World Health Organization and World Bank (5 to 20 per cent of any population).¹³ Disability prevalence rates in the region vary significantly, ranging from less than 1 per cent to 16.1 per cent in different countries. Latest estimates from a global study show that 28.9 million or one in ten children aged 0 to 17 years in the ESA region have disabilities.¹⁴

Identification systems do not often account for the varying needs of children with disabilities, and no formal identification systems are available in most countries. Limited and inaccurate data on the number of children with disabilities and the absence of a standardised method for disability identification could mean an underestimation of the imperative for inclusive measures. Overall, statistics can often be unreliable due to the differences in the definition and methodologies for measuring disability.

Initiatives to improve disability data and monitoring of the education of children with disabilities are ongoing in most countries in the region, albeit at varying levels of planning and implementation. In most of the countries (17 out of 21), data collection on and monitoring of inclusive education are at the initial

or developing stages. A few countries (4) reported being more advanced in promoting disability inclusion in data collection and monitoring. More recent population censuses and household surveys have adopted the Washington Group Question Sets¹⁵ in their methodologies. The lack of standardized methodologies in data collection also generate inconsistencies in the results. Nevertheless, improvements are ongoing.

Across the region, there are various initiatives to improve disability data collection within the education system and children with disabilities are visible in yearly education reports in almost all countries. A few countries are more advanced in terms of linking identification with support services provision. However, schools need capacity building on rights-based approaches to disability identification. The increasing adoption of the Child Functioning Module (CFM)¹⁶ in EMIS signals a positive development. The CFM had been adopted in the Educational Management Information Systems (EMIS) of four countries.

Children with disabilities in ESA are less likely to complete primary and secondary education. Children with disabilities experience more barriers in accessing formal education, owing to the difficult context and myriad of challenges in African countries.

1.5. Identification systems

Across the region, early identification takes place through varied screening and assessment tools to identify different types of disabilities. Only four countries have integrated the Washington Group Question Sets in their screening and identification tools. Most countries in the region have no comprehensive or standardized system for identifying children with disabilities.

Several countries are in the process of developing and implementing tools for the identification and screening of children with disabilities. In some countries, teachers are primarily responsible for the identification of disabilities, while some countries utilize various stakeholder support by tapping parent-teachers associations, Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), government health staff, and community volunteers to conduct screening in schools and communities.

One of the significant challenges faced by children with disabilities and their families is the lack of follow-up

support after screening and identification. This can be addressed by establishing an effective referral system and ensuring both mainstream and specialized support services are accessible to children with disabilities and their families to receive proper interventions and support for their growth and development.

1.6. Leadership and management

The basic education ministry is the lead agency responsible for the education of children with disabilities across the region, except in a few countries where the authority falls on the social protection or social welfare ministry. In most countries, a unit or department within the education ministry has been established to implement and coordinate special education, inclusive education, or a combination of both programmes. Although a dedicated unit does not exist in some countries, the responsibility of improving access of children with disabilities to quality education is articulated within the mandate of the education ministry. However, only a few countries from the region have created guidelines on the roles and responsibilities of government agencies and the governance structure to support the education of learners with disabilities.

Most countries have established a multi-stakeholder body composed of government and non-government partners to support the education of children with disabilities. For instance, some countries have established Special Needs/Inclusive Education Technical Working Groups (TWG) under the education ministry.

Some countries have also created steering committees led by the education ministry and other partner agencies to coordinate efforts in advancing inclusive education. For instance, the steering committee brings together technical and financial partners, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs). Some countries had defined vertical coordination mechanisms to support disability inclusion in schools, wherein the responsibilities of the educational units in supporting inclusion are more structured at different levels of the education system.

Although countries with inclusive education policies mandate schools to improve access of children with disabilities to education, only a few countries have institutionalized standards or guidelines that support teachers, school leaders, and managers

in implementation. In addition, various initiatives, although limited in scale, have been implemented to build the capacity of key education officials in inclusive education.

2. Supply-side

2.1. Approaches to education provision

In ESA countries, education provisions are categorised into special education, integration or mainstreaming in general classes, and inclusion. As previously mentioned, special education remains the most dominant approach to educating children with disabilities, although mainstream and inclusive schools are also referenced in policies and legislation of some countries.

There are efforts to include children with disabilities in regular schools in most countries and efforts to institutionalise inclusive education are evident at the policy level. In addition, project-based and school-level inclusive education programmes are common on the ground. In practice, some countries in the ESA region approach special education as a pathway toward achieving inclusive education, although some countries do not differentiate integration from inclusion.

Despite several efforts to bring children with disabilities into school, they are still far behind in completing their primary and secondary education compared to children without disabilities. The disadvantage faced by children with disabilities to complete primary and secondary school can be attributed to the fact that many children with disabilities cannot enrol at an early age.¹⁷ Further, the low percentages of children with disabilities not completing primary and secondary education show the large gap between children with and without disabilities in accessing opportunities to transition to technical or vocational education or training (TVET), or tertiary education. All countries in the ESA region must urgently address this by providing access to an inclusive school that caters to the diverse needs of all learners and ensuring their progression to the next level is continuous.

2.2. Supported teachers

Governments' initiatives to provide continuous professional development for teachers towards inclusion are reflected in their laws and policies. Only four have established teacher standards with indicators that foster inclusive education. In other countries, professional competency standards for teachers are either non-existent or do not mention inclusion and equity principles. Some countries have included capacity building in inclusive education in their teacher training plans, framework, or standards. However, there is still no comprehensive articulation of the integration of inclusive education in these policy documents.

Disability-inclusive in-service teacher training has been implemented by governments, development organisations and CSOs. Although several countries have initiated national training of teachers on inclusive or special education, only a few countries have continuous initiatives for in-service training related to inclusive education and capacity-building activities were done at the national level for in-service teachers to cater to the large population of teachers nationwide.

Some countries have established decentralised mechanisms to support school-based teacher professional development in inclusive education. Most countries have established resource centres and in-school support from specialists and itinerant teachers and generated handbooks to support the development of the inclusive practice of teachers.

Across the region, a few initiatives have been documented to promote the employment of teachers with disabilities. However, these are limited to encouraging access of persons with disabilities to pre-service teacher education. Other countries have also supported and incentivised in-service teachers with disabilities who teach children with disabilities.

2.3. Learning environment

Efforts to create accessible learning environments are evident at the policy level across the region. Education and disability policies, plans, standards, and guidelines in all countries have provisions for the accessibility of school buildings and other public infrastructure for children with disabilities. Despite a supportive legislative environment, persisting inaccessibility of

school infrastructure shows gaps in implementation. The lack of accessible learning environments remains a key issue across the region. Countries are concerned about poor school infrastructure, inaccessible school buildings and latrines, insufficient financial resources to support building construction and renovation, and lack of accessibility requirements based on Universal Design principles in construction standards. Where building design standards and guidelines are available, they are often poorly enforced.

UNICEF's programming in water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) is making a difference in the lives of school children across the region, however, not all initiatives have a disability focus. Disability-inclusive WASH initiatives are present in half of the countries in ESA. Menstrual health and hygiene in WASH programming are contributing to the participation of girls with and without disabilities in education in various countries.

There is a strong policy environment for child protection in the region. However, despite a supportive legal environment for child protection, disability inclusion in child-protection programmes is not consistent in the region. In addition, corporal punishment in schools is still common but most countries in the region are committed to reforming laws to ban corporal punishment in all settings.

2.4. Curriculum, pedagogy, assessment

The study found that most ESA countries plan to review or revise their curricula. The review of the existing curriculum to assess whether the content is learner-centred and reflects Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles is a promising initial step in ensuring the curriculum is inclusive. Curriculum review and reform initiatives are already underway or have been implemented in some countries in the ESA region to make the curriculum more inclusive. In addition, some countries are leading examples of inclusive curriculum reform in the ESA region.

Some countries have adopted a competency-based curriculum (CBC) that is inclusive and disability-friendly. However, challenges persist in some countries, and curriculum adaptations that respond to the needs of children with disabilities are yet to be made. There

is also a need to harmonize the initiatives of the government and non-state actors.

There are policy initiatives aimed at improving the teaching and learning process and providing children with disabilities the necessary support to learn better in schools. Across the region, there is evidence of countries emphasizing the provision of reasonable accommodation such as adaptable pedagogical approaches and flexible teaching strategies. The active presence of non-state actors in disability-inclusive education has led to positive results.

Key challenges in the region include large class sizes and a high student-teacher ratio. There is also a need to increase teacher capacity, especially in inclusive pedagogy and reasonable accommodation. Despite the remaining pedagogical challenges, the policy initiatives to improve teaching strategies in the ESA region resulted in promising practices such as using flexible teaching and the provision of reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities in some countries.

Some countries' assessment policies target standardised assessments for the promotion of students to the next grade level. In addition, a focus on formative assessment is evident in some countries. Formative assessment is necessary to ensure the learning process is relevant and appropriate to all students, including students with disabilities.

Access to curriculum and assessment remains an issue for learners with disabilities in the ESA region. Inaccessible curriculum and assessment can be addressed by intending to design curriculum framework and assessment activities that are inclusive and relevant for learners with disabilities. Reasonable accommodation must be integrated into the system to prevent discrimination against learners with disabilities and ensure their needs are met and addressed.

2.5. Learning materials

There is a need to address gaps in terms of available learning materials and support. There is limited evidence on the use of the UDL framework to support all children in the classroom. Accessible teaching and learning resources including the provision of assistive technologies help improve the learning of many children with disabilities, however, challenges in

digital infrastructure remain. Available resource centres provide specialised support for children with disabilities but risk perpetuating segregatory practices. While there are several initiatives to provide targeted support for learners with disabilities through resource centres, there is a high risk of further excluding children when they are separated from regular classes.

2.6. Supports services

Most countries acknowledge the need for specialised support services and intervention for children with disabilities. However, countries implement various forms of support services strategies at different levels of administration. Some countries have early identification and referral services in place but challenges in effective implementation persist.

Countries also rely on community-based rehabilitation (CBR) programmes which are "strategies implemented through the efforts of persons with disabilities, their families and communities, and the appropriate health, education, vocational, and social services."¹⁸ In addition, development partners form a vital support system for provision of specialised support services. Non-state actors, like NGOs, OPDs, and CSOs, among others, help deliver and coordinate services across the region.

An important step in achieving effective integrated service provision is through monitoring, data collection, and information-sharing in integrated service delivery. These activities can help identify specific needs of learners with disabilities, recognize context-specific processes that can improve service delivery, avoid redundant services, and evaluate target outcomes.

With regards to financial assistance, most countries provide disability grants and financial assistance programs for children with disabilities and their families. Some financial assistance programmes provide support through scholarships and payment of school fees as well as financial programmes that do not target education specifically but aim to increase the chances for inclusion in education.

3. Demand-side

3.1. Socio-cultural beliefs, awareness, and attitudes

Negative attitudes and discrimination against children with disabilities still prevail at home, in schools, and in the wider community. These negative attitudes and beliefs about disability impact the access of children with disabilities to education. Available evidence suggests that in many societies in the ESA, there are strong negative perceptions towards disability that usually lead to discrimination, stigma, and, in some cases, violence. In the classroom setting, a few studies on teachers, parents, and students' beliefs about the right of children with disabilities to education convey varying opinions on the education of children with disabilities. For example, in some communities, teachers do not believe that students with disabilities have the capacity to achieve in school. Studies from other ESA countries showed that teachers and school heads agree that learners with disabilities should learn in mainstream classrooms with their peers without disabilities.

Governments, CSOs, OPDs, and NGOs, collaborate on advocacy and behaviour change campaigns to address negative attitudes and beliefs about children with disabilities.

Activities to raise awareness and develop positive attitudes toward children with disabilities and inclusive education have been implemented in many countries in the region.

3.2. Participation of children with disabilities, families, communities, and OPDs

There is generally low participation of children with disabilities and their families in educational processes despite enabling policies. Education and disability policies, plans, and standards in some countries encourage the participation of children with disabilities, families, communities, and OPDs in school-level planning and improvement in the form of parent-teacher associations and partnerships, school boards and other similar mechanisms. A few countries have established mechanisms for children's voices to be heard in national-level policy-making such as forums organized annually where children with disabilities can represent themselves.

Parent involvement in school governance encourages them to be agents of change for their children. In some countries parent groups support the education of children with disabilities by helping develop inclusive teaching and learning materials, mobilizing funds for school infrastructure accessibility improvements, and providing feedback on education-related issues through consultations with schools and CSOs. CSOs play a vital role in furthering the rights of children with disabilities to quality education, but technical and financial support is needed. In all countries, CSOs, including OPDs and international humanitarian organisations lead advocacy and communication for social change initiatives.

Parent groups, CSOs, OPDs, and international humanitarian organisations have an active role in disability inclusion, but many of these efforts remain short-term and disjointed. Some organisations expressed the need for greater funding to support their inclusive education programming. Organisations would benefit from support aimed at strengthening their technical capacity on disability and inclusion and creating communities of practice to further help them in advocating for and implementing rights-based inclusive education.

4. Cross-cutting issues

4.1. Gender

Governments in almost all countries in ESA show a strong commitment to integrating gender equity in their education and disability policies and plans which promises a more gender-responsive approach to development programming. Sex-disaggregated disability data is lacking and data on access to education of girls and boys with disabilities in the region is scarce. As a result, girls and boys with disabilities are rendered invisible, affecting government policymaking and provision of targeted interventions.¹⁹

Gender parity has increased worldwide but countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are at the lowest. Globally, gender parity in education has steadily improved.²⁰ Girls' enrolment rate has increased in all regions in the past 10 years, albeit at different rates.²¹ Despite the steady progress, gender disparity at the expense of girls remains in sub-Saharan African countries; gender parity in education at all levels is the lowest among other regions.²² Moreover, the gains achieved in past years are threatened by the extended school closures in the region due to COVID-19.

Almost all countries in the region have established policies that protect women and girls from violence and abuse. However, school-related gender-based violence is still common across ESA. In addition, child marriage, including early and unintended pregnancy, affects the education of girls in many countries.

Gender norms and stereotypes, and harmful practices continue to threaten girls with and without disabilities. While there are various initiatives that help address gender-based discrimination and violence, there is a limited strategic focus on girls with disabilities. Further research is needed to look at sources of discrimination and exclusion, the root of negative attitudes and beliefs, examining the intersectionality of gender, disability, poverty, ethnicity, and location, among other socio-economic factors. There are available data on the experiences of women and girls, but there is a dearth of data on girls with disabilities.

4.2. Humanitarian issues

Most of the countries in the region provided assistive devices and learning materials in accessible formats to support learning continuity during the pandemic. Humanitarian aid organisations were at the forefront of supporting governments in COVID-19 response programmes. To some extent, some humanitarian programmes in the region were disability-inclusive, however, humanitarian response programmes need a stronger disability focus.

Challenges

1. Enabling Environment

- a. Many disability and education laws, policies and strategic plans continue to promote special education, without a clear articulation of the ways in which the system can gradually shift to more inclusive approaches.
- b. There is little focus on capacitating education leaders in inclusive education, providing education response during emergencies, and data collection in the ESPs.
- c. There is limited evidence on budget allocation and funding mechanisms for inclusive education. Available data suggest that budget allocation is often inadequate.
- d. The definition of disability is inconsistent across legislation, national data collection systems, and its adoption in programmes and education provisions for children with disabilities.
- e. A definition of inclusive education based on the CRPD is absent in some education laws and policies.
- f. Across the region, there is a systemic lack of reliable disability data.
- g. While progress is promising in some countries and suggests a move towards rights-based methods, disability identification systems that are based on functional difficulties are yet to be established in most countries. The lack of follow-up support after screening and identification is one of the challenges faced by children with disabilities and their families
- h. The understanding and capacity of education leaders across governance systems in implementing and monitoring disability-inclusive education could be strengthened.
- i. Coordination among government and other key stakeholders involved in managing implementing inclusive education could be improved and initiatives of various stakeholders are not harmonised. Many initiatives are short-term and limited in scope, reaching only a small portion of learners with disabilities.

2. Supply-side

- a. The education provisions on policies and legal frameworks in the ESA region have significantly influenced the main types of education provided on the ground. Special education is still emphasized as the education provision most accessible to children with disabilities, both in policies and actual implementation. Some countries do not differentiate integration from inclusion. The broad definition of inclusive education in most countries arguably contributed to the misinterpretation of what inclusion means.
- b. Generally, there is a lack of continuous school-based professional development programs on inclusive education and learner-centred pedagogy such as UDL for in-service teachers. There is a gap between current capacities and what is expected of teachers to implement inclusive curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.
- c. Policy commitments to providing safe and accessible learning environments lack robust enforcement mechanisms.
- d. While policies support child protection, enforcement mechanisms with focus on children with disabilities are lacking.
- e. Principles of learner-centred approaches (i.e., UDL) are missing in most curricula and assessment methods.
- f. Learning materials in different accessible formats and assistive and augmentative communication tools and devices are often lacking. There is also a lack of training on the use of accessibility tools and devices, braille, and sign language for pre-service and in-service teachers.
- g. Resource centres meant to be hubs for providing reasonable accommodation, assistive technologies, accessible learning materials, and specialized support services, risk becoming another form of segregation without a clear inclusive implementation guideline.
- h. Access to specialized support services for children with disabilities and their families is limited.

3. Demand-side

- a. Awareness of disability and inclusive education remains low. Prevailing negative attitudes, misconceptions, and deeply rooted beliefs about disability hinder many children with disabilities from fulfilling their right to learn alongside other children without disabilities.
- b. While policies supporting the participation of children with disabilities, their families, and OPDs in all matters that affect them are in place, evidence suggests that enforcement across the region is limited. The practice of engaging parents and children with disabilities in decision-making processes remains limited at the school level and seldom reaches national-level decision-making.

4. Cross-cutting issues

- a. Gender initiatives are mostly focused on girls in general and seldom have a strategic approach to include girls with disabilities and gender data lack a disability lens.
- b. Humanitarian response often lacks a focus on disability inclusion.

Recommendations

1. Enabling Environment

- a. Ratify the CRPD and monitor its implementation. For countries that have not ratified the CRPD, prioritise the ratification of the convention. Enforcement of the CRPD must be periodically monitored to ensure exclusion is not taking place.
- b. Reform national legislative frameworks. Across the region, governments must aim to review and reform domestic laws and policies that go against the prescripts of the CRPD, particularly Article 24 and General Comment No. 4. Definitions of disability must be aligned with the CRPD and made consistent across the legislation.
- c. Increase accountability through disability-inclusive strategic planning, monitoring, and financing. Education sector planning needs to set out practical ways in which the system can be shifted towards inclusive education. Governments and decentralised structures must aim to increase financial investments toward inclusive education to effectively address multiple deprivations experienced by children with disabilities.
- d. Improve disability data collection. Increasing accountability in inclusive education means setting out disability indicators in data collection systems at the national, sub-national, and particularly the school level, employing methodologies aligned with the social model. Teachers must be supported in identifying functional difficulties among learners.
- e. Strengthen or establish inclusive early identification and intervention systems. There should be clear and rights-based systems, including guidelines and tools, for early disability identification and intervention. This should be implemented through a cross-sectoral approach, involving multidisciplinary professionals from the education, health, and social protection sectors, and the active participation of parents and families. The system should set out clear pathways from the identification of functional difficulties to assessing support requirements and provision of appropriate interventions.

- f. Strengthen the capacities of education leaders on inclusive education and multi-sectoral collaboration. Although government commitments are apparent, often, there are misunderstandings and confusion on the definition of inclusive education and the required transformations in culture, policies, and practices. School leaders, in particular, have a key role in creating supportive spaces where teachers are encouraged to learn, collaborate, experiment, reflect, and develop inclusive values and classroom practices. Review existing coordination mechanisms and establish one where there is none to harmonise the inclusive education efforts of all stakeholders.

2. Supply-side

- a. Gradually phase out special education. Phasing out special education systems would have to be strategically managed, and the approach could be incremental, based on capacities and available resources. Expertise and resources from the special education system could be utilized as support services within general education.
- b. Prioritise teacher education and school-based support mechanisms for professional development. Teacher preparation must aim to dismantle traditional notions of special education and enable teacher trainees to develop reflective practices, agency, and values to independently examine their own beliefs about disability and child rights. For teachers already in the service, continuous and work-based professional development support, such as communities of practice, is essential. Collaborative practices among teachers, including special education teachers/staff must be strengthened and encouraged.
- c. Ensure accessibility of the learning environment and the teaching and learning process. Principles of Universal Design should be applied in building standards and guidelines, curricula, instruction, and assessment to promote learner-centred approaches. All educational facilities must be made accessible, including WASH facilities.

- d. Support the creation of safe and welcoming learning environments. Enforcement mechanisms that include a comprehensive approach to addressing violence against children with disabilities in schools should be developed based on strong evidence bases.
- e. Strengthen early identification and intervention systems. Identification tools and procedures must adopt rights-based approaches that are strengths-based, such as the Washington Group Questions. Referral systems should establish clear pathways and offer a continuum of services. Ensure early intervention and other support services are integrated and delivered by multi-disciplinary teams of professionals. Identification must be directly linked with service provision, and this could be done effectively within the school setting.

3. Demand-side

- a. Raise awareness of disability and inclusive education and address negative attitudes. Comprehensive studies on the underlying roots of negative attitudes and beliefs about disability and inclusive education should be conducted and inform policymaking, programming, advocacy, and social and behavioural change interventions. Advocacy and awareness-raising efforts should address negative attitudes and beliefs at all levels of the society, considering social and cultural contexts.
- b. Encourage meaningful participation of children, families, communities, and OPDs in advancing inclusive education. Increase the quality of participation of children with disabilities and OPDs. This would mean a seat at the table where decisions are being made. Children with disabilities, their families, and OPDs should actively participate in all stages of inclusive education programming, from the identification of issues to the implementation and evaluation of programmes

4. Cross-cutting issues

- a. Ensure all interventions concerning children with disabilities are gender-transformative. Further research should also be conducted on the experiences of girls with disabilities and the drivers of gender-based discrimination and violence.
- b. Humanitarian actors should invest in raising their technical capacity for disability-inclusive humanitarian response. All humanitarian actions should be inclusive and have an explicit disability focus. The rights of children with disabilities, including the right to inclusive quality education, do not diminish during emergencies and conflict.

Endnotes

- 1 United Nations, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948.
- 2 UNESCO, Convention against Discrimination in Education, 1960.
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