

An introduction to disability

GOAL 01 END POVERTY IN ALL ITS FORMS EVERYWHERE

Target 4.5

By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.

Target 10.2

By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status.

▶ What do we mean by disability?

Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

This is the definition of disability used in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was adopted in 2008 and is based on the 'social model of disability'. The social model of disability suggests that disability is caused by the way society is organised, rather than by a person's impairment or difference and looks at ways of removing barriers that restrict life choices for disabled people.

▶ Why is it a problem?

Over one billion people – 15% of the world's population – are disabled, 80% of which live in developing countries. Disability is closely linked with poverty: it is thought that over 50% of disabled people in low income countries cannot afford healthcare, and that almost 90% of disabled children in Africa do not go to school.

People with disabilities regularly face significant levels of discrimination and stigma and as a result are often not visible in society and are prevented from fully participating in their families and communities. There are many superstitions and preconceptions around disability amongst communities around the world - such as disability being 'the result of bad actions in a past life' or that 'you can catch a disability by touching someone'. Consequently, many disabled people are kept hidden from public view, are out-of-school and unemployed.

▶ Education and disability

There are 57 million children globally out of school and it is estimated that two thirds of those children have disabilities. There are a number of reasons for this:

01 They are poor. Even when primary education is free, there are additional costs such as school uniforms and school supplies that many families simply cannot afford.

02 The school is not nearby. In many rural areas, children walk for miles to go to school. Attempting this journey with a disability can at best be difficult – at worse – dangerous.

The truth about disability

15%

Almost 15% of the world's population, or estimated 1 billion people, live with disabilities. They are the world's largest minority.

80%

80% of persons with disabilities live in developing countries, according to the UN Development Programme.

25%

Women and girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to abuse. A small 2004 survey in Orissa, India, found that virtually all of the women and girls with disabilities were beaten at home, 25% of women with intellectual disabilities had been raped and 6% of women with disabilities had been forcibly sterilized.

90%

According to UNESCO, 90% of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school.

1.7x

Research indicates that violence against children with disabilities occurs at annual rates at least 1.7 times greater than for their peers without disabilities.

03 The school's facilities are not accessible. In many schools, electricity is scarce and classrooms are dark. For children with visual impairments, it can be extremely difficult to see the blackboard, even with the support of special reading glasses. Many schools don't have ramps, making it extremely difficult for children with mobility impairments to get into their classroom.

04 The school doesn't have adequate learning materials. Assistive devices are available, but only for those who can afford to pay for them. Braille kits, reading glasses, hearing aids and accessible learning resources are expensive and unaffordable for families on low or erratic incomes.

05 The stigma & discriminatory attitudes around disability often stand in the way of disabled people attending school. Most disabled children grow up with low self-esteem, rarely interact with other children their age and are often bullied. If the opportunity to go to school does arrive, many children are too scared or unwilling. When a disabled child does go to school, many teachers feel uncomfortable with them in their class or have not been trained appropriately to teach them. Parents often exacerbate the situation further, fearing a child's disability is contagious illness that their child could catch.

▶ What can be done?

To address the barriers that people living with disabilities face, change is needed at both the national and community level.

National level

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD), which explains at length what rights people living with disabilities have, has been transformative in driving governments to pass disability legislation at the national level. Many developing countries such as Uganda and Kenya have introduced comprehensive disability legislation, which, amongst other things, includes a quota to ensure the representation of people with disabilities in employment.

Community level

Addressing stigma and discrimination at the community level can have a significant impact on the lives of people living with a disability. One of the best ways to do this is to show communities what disabled people ARE able to do, such as attending school, getting a job and having a role in the community. Accessible buildings (including toilets), accessible equipment, trained support workers and training for teachers are all needed to make this possible.

JOYCE'S STORY, NAIROBI

Joyce, the mother of a disabled girl called Abigail, is frustrated by the stigma that continues to surround children living with disabilities in Kenya. Abigail has multiple visual impairments, including deafblindness and Cerebral Palsy. Joyce had to leave her job to care for Abigail, and believes that the stigma surrounding having a disabled child will affect her future employment opportunities. Her friends now avoid her and other parents refuse to let their children play with Abigail.

Abigail is part of a Sense International community-based education project that helps her learn important communication skills and life skills. It also enables her parents to take advantage of transient paid work which has helped alleviate some of the financial burdens which many families with disabled children face. Ideally, children like Abigail should be enrolled in inclusive education programmes at mainstream schools. This would give Abigail the opportunity to interact with other children her age and allow Joyce to find more stable and consistent employment opportunities.



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