

Pathway to progress: strengthening access and equity in education for disabled students in sub-Saharan Africa.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals aim to make the world a significantly better place. Providing quality education for all could be considered one of the most important goals of them all. These efforts became clearer to me when I had the opportunity to meet Scader Louis, a Malawian who joined a U.S. State Department delegation, and visited our class. Ms. Louis lives with a spinal cord injury and shared the challenges she faced in accessing educational services in her own country. Through her research and activism, she found that many other students with special needs in Sub-Saharan Africa were unable to attend school. In 2011, the World Health Organization found that less than half of disabled individuals in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, and Namibia had adequate access to educational opportunities (World Report on Disability). According to the UN, around 80 million Africans live with a disability, which would amount to around 5% of the continent's population. 28.9 million within that demographic are school aged children (grades K-12, or 3-17 years old). It is critical that the global community address educational inequality so that all students have the skills and knowledge to be successful in their lives.

The African Union and other NGOs have attempted to address the educational inequalities faced by disabled communities face through legislation such as the African Rehabilitation Institute (1988), Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007), and the Proclamation of the African Decade of Disabled Persons (2000-2009). The African Disability Protocol, a legal framework that would require African Union states to implement laws and policies that would promote disability rights, currently has 14 out of the 15 ratifications that it needs to come into effect (February 2024). This policy would ensure that the disabled receive quality healthcare, employment aid, and sufficient education. In our most recent state sponsored

delegation this March (2024), I spoke with Korotimi Haidara, the president of a nonprofit K-6 school in her hometown of Bamako, Mali. As an educator and school administrator, Mrs. Haidara shared with me that the government in Mali takes little to no responsibility for the education of its disabled population, and the slack is mainly picked up by NGO's.

When discussing the various challenges she faces as a wheelchair user, Ms. Louis mentioned that the struggle for those with physical disabilities in education starts long before the first school bell rings. Transportation and infrastructure in many African countries was not designed with physical disabilities or impairments in mind. In the U.S., the Americans with Disabilities Act provides accommodations such as like access ramps, handicap reserved bathroom stalls and parking spots, braille signs, and vehicle wheelchair lifts remove major barriers in getting students to school and keeping them in school. Unfortunately, many of these supports have not been provided in countries such as Malawi and Mali. In every case, students should be provided with access to high quality education regardless of their circumstances.

I know from firsthand experience, the impact that inclusive education can have on the disabled community. Even if they are not learning AP and IB level material, just simply being in a school setting and participating in the social aspects of public education will support students and their academic standing. In addition to core subjects, children also experience social-emotional learning while attending school. Without this important steppingstone in development, it's difficult to become independent when transitioning into adulthood. Furthermore, it is proven that persons without a standard K-12 education are more likely to be unemployed than their K-12 educated peers. Those with disabilities are already a minority that is less likely to become employed (or employed with a full-time job at a livable wage). It is estimated that about 80% of

disabled people settled in African countries are unemployed, and the wage gap between those without a disability and those with a disability is up to 15% (WHO).

It is important to recognize there is not one single solution to this education inequality, considering the number and variety of disabilities and the unique challenges each country within Sub-Saharan Africa faces. To change the stigma, the first challenge that needs addressing is the African socio-cultural attitude toward disability. Stereotyping, lack of representation, and absence of education are the main contributors to ableism and disadvantage. Additionally, it is deemed culturally appropriate to hide or neglect disabled family members out of humiliation and fear; Without representation in media and literature, disability seems shameful because it is uncommon. Educating the public on the science of congenital anomalies in a way that does not dismiss an individual's beliefs and values will introduce additional perspectives and spark intentional conversation.

Additional financial assistance to the NGO's that support this demographic of students will lead to a significance increase in opportunity. This funding could come for various institutions. If pulled directly from the government, a portion of the tax on education might be set aside to create a scholarship pool that would aid in creating and distributing resources to pre-existing schools and creating accessible education plans (IEP's and 504's in the United States). Another possible donation source could be found in philanthropists such as Bill and Melinda Gates or Warren Buffett. Inspiration can be found in action taken by social media presences like Hank and John Green, who give a portion of the profit from their Crash Course and VlogBrothers YouTube channels to fight maternal mortality in Sierra Leone by funding the Koidu Government Hospital and Wellbody Clinic in partnership with the Partners in Health Organization. Pouring money and passion into one NGO that supports roughly 5 kids, will set

examples for other NGO's that support 10, 50, and even 100 kids, thus creating a domino effect of reforms in making education accessible for all ages, genders, and abilities.

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