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Tens of millions of children with disabilities out of school due to poor government and donor practice, report finds

- Disability rights and development organisations launch new research report, *#CostingEquity*
- They call on governments & donors to urgently prioritise education for children with disabilities
- Billions of dollars of income from the world's poorest countries is being lost through lack of schooling and employment for huge numbers of people who have disabilities
- A severe lack of funding, data and expertise among both national governments and global donors—even including long-standing supporters of these issues such as the European Union, the Global Partnership for Education, and USAID—is largely responsible

A report launched at the United Nations today finds that millions of children with disabilities are being left out of school because little to no money is being budgeted for their needs.

At least half of the world's 65 million school-age children with disabilities are not in primary or lower secondary school.

#CostingEquity; The case for disability-responsive education financing highlights the issue as a major challenge standing in the way of success for the Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030.

The research was produced by the International Disability and Development Consortium (IDDC)—supported by Light for the World, Open Society Foundations and several other leading disability rights and development organisations—who are calling on both governments and donors to urgently take action.

The case for inclusive education

#CostingEquity strongly recommends 'inclusive education' as the best method for governments and donors alike to reach children with disabilities: that is, quality learning opportunities for the vast majority of children *within* a mainstream system.

Despite evidence of the significant benefits of inclusive education, particularly during early childhood development, most governments and external financiers are not paying heed; too often ring-fencing small allocations for special education, or forgetting children with disabilities altogether. The report finds a persistent failure to invest in system-wide reform.

"Inclusive education can drastically reduce out of school populations; it can remove learning barriers for every child; it can tackle discrimination in society; and, it is considerably cheaper than segregated education."

"Yet, despite this evidence, no-one is putting up the money, the research, the training or the time to coordinate system-wide change to empower children with disabilities to attend schools in classrooms alongside their non-disabled peers," explained Nafisa Baboo, Senior Advisor for Inclusive Education at Light for the World and co-coordinator of the IDDC inclusive Education Task Group.

Lack of government engagement

#CostingEquity describes domestic funding as the most important source for education financing, highlighting the severe problem that many governments do not share how much they spend on schooling for children with disabilities; let alone whether those funds go into segregated or inclusive education.

"Many governments wrongly, believe that the returns on investing in inclusive education will be low. We really hope this report helps mark a turning point in understanding of the huge benefits of financing

and education for children with disabilities,” said Ola Abu Alghaib, global head of influencing at Leonard Cheshire Disability.

In Ethiopia, where an estimated 96% of children with disabilities are out of school – the report highlights how the government’s Education Sector Plan anticipates closing the financing gap using household and community contributions. The report raises the concern that increasing reliance on household support for education financing could exacerbate educational exclusion for children with disabilities, who are often found in the poorest households.

Severe lack of funding, expertise and shared-practice among donors

The *#CostingEquity* report finds that even among the world’s leading donor education agencies, the situation is far from what is needed to reach any way near the target agreed in the Sustainable Development Goals to ensure “inclusive and equitable quality education for all” by 2030.

The research paper surveys a wide range of donors on their efforts towards disability-inclusive education, including many of the organisations who have helped ‘lead the charge’ on raising the issue of education for children with disabilities: DFAT (Australia), DFID (UK), European Union, GIZ (Germany), Global Partnership for Education, Norad (Norway), UNICEF, USAID (USA), and the World Bank.

The report says that, despite limited signs of progress in some agencies in terms of organisational strategies, monitoring frameworks and staff awareness; progress is seldom felt on a country level, ‘on the ground’.

The report cites several reasons for the gap between commitments on paper and programmes in reality, including a lack of dedicated staff—across any of the organisations—who could be identified as fully engaged in promoting disability-inclusive education, as well as competing priorities.

The report also highlights how most donor aid does not include amounts earmarked for disability or inclusive approaches. Norad, the Norwegian development agency, was unusual in being able to show that 29% of its education funds were directed to inclusive education.

None of the organisations surveyed for this report could show a portfolio-wide approach to disability-inclusive education.

“We are seeing the signs of emerging commitment to disability-inclusive education across donor agencies, but progress is going at a snail’s pace compared to the scale of the issue we are facing,” warned Ingrid Lewis, Director, Enabling Education Network.

“This report is a collective wake-up call to all of us about the urgency of the situation and how desperately we need to join together to share knowledge, best practice, and resources as well as build capacity, collect data, document and research different models of practice to start to make things better,” said Sian Tesni, CBM Senior Advisor for Education.

Global decline in aid for education

The *#CostingEquity* report follows the *Global Education Monitoring Report*, released in September of this year, which found the education sector globally has been substantially underfunded, and international aid to education is declining.

“This global trend is a huge problem for those of us who fight for education rights for children with disabilities. Education is not a priority sector for government or donor investment, and education for children with disabilities comes even lower down the list. Children with disabilities are constantly left at the very back of the queue, and the impact on both individuals and economies can be disastrous,” explained Julia McGeown, Inclusive Education Technical Advisor at Handicap International.

Recommendations

The report recommends that governments in low-income contexts need to close persistent gaps between inclusive education policy and practice, and provide adequate domestic financing for this. It calls for a more strategic use of existing resources, reprioritisation of budgets, stronger focus on quality measures such as improved teacher education, and strong political and community leadership on inclusion.

It suggests that the Global Partnership for Education should develop a new financing window or facility for disability-inclusive education to grow additional financing and ensure that donor resources are better targeted to disability-inclusive education--providing technical support to countries, innovation grants as well as large-scale evidence generation.

#CostingEquity also calls on all donors to prioritise efforts to reverse the decline in aid for education and normalise disability-responsiveness as a core criterion in education funding, both with partner governments and with implementing contractors (consultants, NGOs, etc.). This should be reflected in donor policies and strategies on disability and inclusion that all existing and new staff must be oriented on.

“Governments, together with the world’s leading donor agencies, could help send tens of millions of children to school if they begin prioritising this issue. Not only is it the right thing to do, it is also the clever thing to do; if we want to accomplish a real impact come 2030, in order to leave no one behind,” said Marion Steff, Policy Advisor at Sightsavers.

Notes to editors

The International Disability and Development Consortium is a global consortium of disability and development non-governmental organisations (NGOs), mainstream development NGOs and disabled people's organisations supporting disability and development work in more than 100 countries around the world.

More info: <http://iddcconsortium.net/>