

About childhood disability

This document, we hope, will give you a little insight into this forgotten issue which affects huge numbers of children and families in sub-Saharan Africa.

What is the status of young disabled people in Africa?

Despite the free primary education many African governments now provide, disabled children are rarely considered and the support and facilities they need to access integrated free education are seldom provided. Most African countries lack any co-ordinated effort to address the rights of young disabled people and to ensure their participation. Although one in ten of the adult population is disabled, there are few if any figures available for childhood disability. The rate is likely to be the same or higher, yet in very few schools will you find a disabled child. The vast majority are kept at home, hidden from sight.

The actual numbers of disabled children are usually assumed to be the problem (Csapo 1986, 1987, Mittler 1993a, Okyere 1994, Wiesinger 1986), therefore the solutions tend to focus on prevention, cure, and making the child as normal as possible. Statistics do not focus on negative attitudes, policies and institutions which exclude or do not respond positively to the needs of disabled children, which would in turn lead to solutions based on changing attitudes, policies and institutions.

What commitments have been made by African leaders on disability?

The UN African Decade of Disability began in 1999, when the Heads of State of the African Union made a proclamation on the Full Participation, Equality and Empowerment of People with Disabilities in Africa. In it, they recognised that environmental hazards, natural disaster, accidents, conflict and war increase the levels of disability on the continent. They recognised the need to improve the provision opportunities and services for people with disabilities, as well as tackling attitudinal change and accessibility.

What progress has been made on disability in Africa?

Disability movements have begun to make some headway towards achieving change. For example, in Uganda disabled people have achieved significant participation in political life. However, there is still a need to ensure that positive policies are translated into inclusive practice. The presence of USDC in Uganda means that the government will be continually reminded of its responsibility to ensure the involvement of young disabled people in development processes. The Tanzanian Government now have a junior minister with a brief for disability issues and senior political figures are starting to take a greater interest.

How many young disabled people are there in Africa?

Most African countries have not collected accurate national statistics about the numbers of young disabled people who live there. We do know that over half of the continent's population is under the age of 18. We also know that on average approximately 10% of people worldwide are living with disability. We therefore estimate that 50 million people, one in every 8 people living on the African continent, is a young disabled person. (In the Kilolo district bordering Iringa Town, 14.9% of the adult population were classed as living with a disability in the recent census. It is likely that the figure for young disabled people is higher at around 18-19%, meaning almost 1 in five may be disabled).

W.H.O. Public health reviews: Hundreds of thousands of children in sub Saharan Africa are permanently disabled as a result of injuries and lack of access to post injury care. Often care is short term surgical or first aid when disability can only be avoided with long term intervention of

which physiotherapy was deemed the most important.

Are there organisations focused on disability issues in Africa?

There are a number of international and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on disability issues. Several restrict their activities to a single disability and those who look at a range of disabilities do not specialise, specifically, in working with children and young people. Many international NGOs who work with children include some disability-related projects in their work, but often see childhood disability as a marginal concern. Some child-centred organisations have incorporated activities with young disabled people into their work, but a concentrated effort to improve the lives of young people in Africa is still lacking.

What are the main obstacles to change?

One of the few large studies/consultations on disability in young people in Africa reported disturbing findings were about continued rejection, neglect, abuse and marginalisation of young disabled people. This illustrates the huge distance that has to be travelled in terms of attitude by communities, families, NGOs and governments if young disabled people are to be afforded their human rights. This process will require a huge shift in all of our attitudes and a total rethink of our approach to ability and inclusion.

Why is changing attitudes towards disability particularly important?

Many parents still feel that the birth of a disabled child is a great misfortune:

“God is unjust because he creates. I am not a bad person but I have to look after a child with disability. Bad people do not face similar fate” – a mother from a focus group discussion in Uganda.

“...the father and the stepmother of a disabled child locked him in a goat house without feeding him so that he could die. The neighbours became curious and concerned when they did not see the child around for two days. Since nobody could tell them the whereabouts of the child, they called in the local councilor who mounted a search and found the child in a frightening state.”

We also found that most men blamed disability on mothers and believed that they had brought misfortune into the home by giving birth to young disabled people. A local government worker in Uganda was one of many men who denied parenting a disabled child: “I do not give birth to such children”.

Addressing the attitudes of parents and everyone else in communities will be of critical importance if the rights of young disabled people are to be realised.

What other challenges do young disabled people face?

Young disabled people struggle at each and every stage to access the services which they need in terms of healthcare and rehabilitation, education, training and, later, employment. Often national government struggles to influence at this level, whatever national policies may be. Local organisations may be better placed to develop locally appropriate examples of how these challenges can be met and to build long-term capacity as well as contributing to the necessary changes in attitudes.