

POLICY BRIEF ON INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE BASIC EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN AKWA-IBOM STATE

Introduction:

According to UNICEF, about 95% of children with disabilities in developing countries are out of school and 90% of them may never gain access to basic education in their lifetime. In actual terms, UNESCO report indicates that there are over 10.5 million out of school children in Nigeria. It will not be out of place to estimate that 5 to 7 million of them are children with disabilities. This projection is in line with World Bank and WHO projections that persons with disabilities constitute about 15% of populations in developing countries and that between 80 to 90% of them don't gain access to basic needs of life especially basic education. The primary underlying causes of this situation are the exclusive and inaccessible nature, structure and system of virtually all primary and secondary schools in Nigeria; the confinement of the education of children with disabilities to very few, poorly staffed, poorly equipped and outdated special schools; very low public awareness on issues of inclusive education; inadequate institutional and human capacities required to implement inclusive education; and inadequate, poor implementation or non-availability of appropriate legal and policy frameworks required for the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities.

Akwa-Ibom State Government is yet to initiate any policy on inclusive education. However, the state is currently making efforts to administer the integration of children with disabilities into few regular public primary and secondary schools while virtually all public primary and secondary schools in Akwa-Ibom State are not inclusive of, and accessible to children with disabilities.

It is important that Akwa-Ibom State Government urgently make all primary and secondary public and private schools inclusive of, and accessible to all children including those with disabilities because this will drastically reduce the number of out of school children; reduce the social burden of unproductive and unskilled population and increase the actual human resource capacity of Akwa-Ibom State in particular and Nigeria as a whole.

What is to be done is for Akwa-Ibom State Government to provide all existing and newly established primary and secondary schools with inclusive and accessible infrastructures like classrooms, playgrounds, toilets, etc; adaptive teaching/instructional aids and technologies; well trained teaching and non-teaching staff; initiate public awareness programmes and strengthen relevant legal and policy frameworks on inclusive education.

Nigeria has signed and ratified the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 24 of which provides that all schools must be inclusive of, and accessible to all children including those with disabilities. Nigeria has equally signed-up to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Goal 4 of which targets that by 2030, all school-age children including those with disabilities must have access to qualitative, functional and effective basic education. The National Policy on Education provides that education must be inclusive and that all children including those with disabilities have the right to qualitative, functional and effective

basic education. The Universal Basic Education Act of 2004 provides that basic education is free and compulsory for all school-age children.

Nature and Magnitude of the Problem:

The population of children with disabilities who are out of school in Akwa-Ibom State have reached alarming levels. According to Nigeria's current population statistics, Akwa-Ibom State is projected to have an average population of about 270,000 children with different disabilities out of which only an average of 10,000 are currently receiving some form of basic education through the few special needs schools and inclusive units in both public and private primary schools, secondary schools and learning centres. Akwa-Ibom State currently has a total of 7 special public and private schools and learning centres for children with disabilities with the combined enrolment capacity of about 2000 pupils. Most of these special needs schools are sited in very distant (often hard-to-reach) locations lacking in basic infrastructures like roads, electricity power supply and portable water. In addition, most special needs schools are lacking in basic educational infrastructure, human, material and financial resources.

UNICEF and several other renowned international and local educational organizations and professionals have enunciated the several other social implications and limitations of special needs schools to include: its very expensive cost of administration and management; waste of scarce educational human, material and financial resources; promotion of discrimination and segregation of people with disabilities; denial and abuse of the rights of children with disabilities to social interaction and communal life; and worsening of the low self-esteem conditions of persons with disabilities.

Other Risk Factors:

There are several contributing risk factors for why over 200,000 children with disabilities in Akwa-Ibom State are out of school. The obvious cause will be the very exclusive and inaccessible regular primary and secondary schools. This make it impossible for children with disabilities to attend schools within their locality closest to their residence as other non-disabled children. It imposes the avoidable hardship of having to travel long distances to special schools; the agony of early childhood separation from parents and loved ones and the pain of confinement into segregation.

Further compacting the exclusion of, and inaccessibility of over 200,000 children with disabilities to basic education in Akwa-Ibom State is the absence of appropriate legal and policy framework on inclusive education for children with disabilities. While Akwa-Ibom State seem to be making efforts in this direction through its integrated education programme, there is little or no attempt at implementation of inclusive basic education. Legal and policy frameworks are necessary to serve as implementation guide especially with regard to statutory planning and budgeting, as well as standard regulation especially with regard to enforcement of compliance, monitoring and evaluation.

Another key causal factor is the low public awareness in Akwa-Ibom State on issues of inclusive education especially among public officials and policy makers, professionals, parents, and other stakeholders which have made it difficult to increase their interest and commitment to inclusive

and accessible basic education for children with disabilities. This is also responsible for the inability of stakeholders to collaborate effectively on how to make all public and private primary and secondary schools inclusive and accessible for children with disabilities.

Finally, the low level of institutional and human capacity especially among relevant education agencies of government in Akwa-Ibom State, educational professionals like teachers, care-givers, social workers, medical practitioners, etc and the low capacity-building opportunities through relevant academic and professional training programmes administered by tertiary institutions have made it difficult to effectively implement inclusive basic education for children with disabilities in Akwa-Ibom State. At the moment, there are no tertiary institutions (Universities and Colleges of Education) in Akwa-Ibom State which provide comprehensive academic and professional course programmes on special/inclusive education. This has greatly limited the availability of needed manpower for the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities. Similarly, there are little or no incentives to retain trained special educationists as over 70% of them are either working in other non-education sectors and/or are currently unemployed.

Benefits:

Experts have suggested that inclusion as a strategy meant to include the excluded or marginalised groups in educational programmes including schooling, holds a lot of prospects for Nigeria.

1. Inclusion enhances the attainment of the objectives of the National Policy on Education, Universal Basic Education Act of 2004, the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Sustainable Development Goals. Education cannot be for all until it is received by all. A system that excludes some people, cannot be for all and should therefore give way to one that is accommodating of all. It has been argued, "A system that serves only a minority of children while denying attention to a majority of others that equally need special assistance ... need not prosper in the 21st century.
2. Inclusion promotes a sense of cooperation and the feeling of togetherness in the learner.
3. It promotes favourable competition among school children of different abilities, endowments and backgrounds.
4. In addition to its direct benefit on children with disabilities, inclusion allows for the resources of special education teachers and other relevant professionals to be tapped to the fullest, since they could be used as regular school teachers. It should be noted here, that special education teachers have the unique ability to teach in both the special and regular schools. Inclusion thus presents an avenue for full utilisation of the resources of all the members of the community.
5. Inclusive education provides a means of building a cooperative school community, where all are accommodated and able to participate.
6. Inclusive schooling is cost effective, as all the learners are accommodated in the same environment using virtually the same facilities. Unnecessary duplications of cost that are associated with segregated arrangements, are avoided in inclusion.

Priority Action Steps:

There are several cost-effective ways to drastically reduce the population of children with disabilities who are out of school through implementation of inclusive basic education:

- Develop and implement a policy (and possibly a legislation) on Inclusive Education;
- Set-up an inter-ministerial Technical Working Group to coordinate implementation of the policy on inclusive basic education;
- Adopt a universally acceptable design/model of accessible and inclusive school environment (MAISE);
- Map, designate, rehabilitate and properly equip at least 9 existing public regular primary and secondary schools in the state to serve as pilot and demonstration of inclusive basic education;
- Rehabilitate all existing special schools in the state to serve as Special Resource Centre to support children with severe/multiple disabilities ; provide capacity-building and training to regular teachers, special educators, care-givers, medical practitioners, etc; and support design and development of special/adaptive instructional materials;
- Support tertiary educational institutions in Akwa-Ibom State to commence and/or strengthen academic and professional course programmes on special/inclusive education, and award special scholarships and educational grant to encourage interest in the courses;
- Implement a comprehensive and continuous public awareness programme and stakeholder engagement on inclusive education.

Conclusion:

Even if enough schools were to be provided to accommodate all children in Akwa-Ibom State, children with disabilities would still be excluded if those schools are not designed, constructed, equipped, staffed, administered and managed in a disability-inclusive and physically accessible manner. Inclusive education is the global best educational practice and standard to ensure that no child is out of school irrespective of their disabilities, gender and other social status. This is why Goal 4 of the SDGs comprehensively provides achievable targets for inclusive education.

Inclusive education is the best way for proper and judicious use of scarce educational human, material and financial resources; ensuring that such resources are properly deployed to give all children equal access to qualitative functional and effective education where they learn, play and grow together in same classes and school environment.

Special schools have been found to be socially dysfunctional and irrelevant to the total well being of persons with disabilities as they help reinforce negative social practices such as discrimination, segregation, low self-esteem and denial of the fundamental rights of children with disabilities.

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" Improve Access for Inclusive Basic Education for Children With Disabilities in Nigeria"

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