

## **Empowering Children with Disabilities through Accessible and Inclusive Education for Sustainable Development**

Taofeek Olayinka **BALOGUN**  
baloguntaofeek10@gmail.com, (+234 803 561 4210)  
Department of Special Education  
Federal College of Education, Okene

### **Abstract**

With its no poverty and quality education goals, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remain one of the most potent tools for empowering children with disabilities. However, the extent of achieving this feat will be determined by how accessible and inclusive education is for children with disabilities. The objective of this paper revolves around empowering children with disabilities through accessible and inclusive education for sustainable development. It underscores stemming poverty and making education more accessible and inclusive for these children so that the 2030 SDG agenda can be realized for all and especially for children with disabilities. This paper posits that poverty is an adversary for educating and empowering children with disabilities. It suggests that persons with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty due to societal barriers of discrimination, limited access to education and employment and lack of inclusion in livelihood and other educational and social programmes. It conceptualizes accessible and inclusive education in the context of global best practices. The study concludes that SDG will not be fully achieved unless children with disabilities were given ample opportunities for empowerment.

**Keywords:** Empowering, Children with disabilities, Accessibility, Inclusive education and sustainable development.

### **Introduction**

In his message on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, United Nations Secretary-General said “The UN Flagship Report on Disability and Development 2018 – Realizing the SDGs by, for and with persons with disabilities shows that people with disabilities are at a disadvantage regarding most Sustainable Development Goals, but also highlights the growing number of good practices that can create a more inclusive society in which they can live independently (United Nations (2018))”. It is clear by this statement, a lot yet has to be done to realize the aim of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, pledging to “leave no one behind.

According to United Nations (2023), Sustainable Goal is an ambitious plan of action of the international community towards a peaceful and prosperous world, where the dignity of an individual person and equality among all is applied as the fundamental principle, cutting across the three pillars of the work of the United Nations: Development, Human Rights and Peace and Security. It added that it was critical to ensure, in this regard, the full and equal participation of persons with disabilities in all spheres of society and create enabling environments by, for and with persons with disabilities, in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

According to Biermann, Kanie, and Rakhyun (2017), the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) formulated the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 as a part of the Post-2015 Development Agenda. This agenda aimed to establish a new global development framework to replace the Millennium Development Goals, which concluded in the same year.

The SDGs consist of various goals that need to be achieved, including eliminating poverty, eradicating hunger, promoting good health and well-being, providing quality education, ensuring gender equality, providing clean water and sanitation, promoting affordable and clean energy, stimulating economic growth and decent work opportunities, fostering innovation and infrastructure development, reducing inequality, promoting sustainable cities and communities, encouraging responsible consumption and production, taking action against climate change, protecting life below water, conserving life on land, promoting peace, justice, and strong institutions, and fostering partnerships for the goals.

World Health Organisation (WHO, 2023) estimated that one billion people, which accounts for 15% of the world's population, live with some form of disability. Developing countries have a higher prevalence of disability compared to other countries. It added that people with disabilities are more likely to experience adverse socioeconomic outcomes such as less education, poorer health, lower levels of employment, and higher poverty rates. Poverty can increase the risk of disability through malnutrition, lack of access to education and healthcare, unsafe working conditions, polluted environments, and inadequate access to safe water and sanitation. Similarly, disability can increase the risk of poverty due to a lack of employment and education opportunities, lower wages, and increased expenses associated with living with a disability. There are numerous barriers to full social and economic inclusion for people with disabilities. These can include inaccessible physical environments and transportation, the unavailability of assistive devices and technologies, non-adapted means of communication, gaps in service delivery, and discriminatory prejudice and stigma in society. These barriers make it difficult for people with disabilities to participate fully in society and achieve their full potential.

It is evident from the discussion regarding the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that disability should not be a basis or standard for denying access to development programs and the fulfillment of human rights. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework contains seven specific targets that pertain to individuals with disabilities and six additional targets for vulnerable populations, which encompass persons with disabilities. This paper discusses the importance of providing accessible and inclusive

education to children with disabilities in order to empower them and promote sustainable development.

### **Who are the Children with Disabilities?**

As per the Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2008) children with disabilities encompass those who have enduring physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that, when combined with various obstacles, may impede their complete and meaningful participation in society on an equal footing. The group of children with disabilities is highly diverse, ranging from those born with a genetic condition affecting their physical, mental, or social development, to those who have sustained severe injuries, nutritional deficiencies, or infections leading to long-term functional consequences. Additionally, it includes children exposed to environmental toxins resulting in developmental delays or learning disabilities and those who have developed anxiety or depression due to stressful life events.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2007) describes "disability" as a dynamic concept that arises from the interplay between people with impairments and the social and environmental barriers that impede their full and equal participation in society. The Convention defines "persons with disabilities" as those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that, when combined with various obstacles, may hinder their ability to participate fully and effectively in society on an equal footing with others. It is important to recognize that the concept of disability is not fixed and may vary depending on the prevailing conditions. Disability is regarded not as a medical condition, but rather as a consequence of negative attitudes and an inhospitable environment towards certain individuals. By removing these barriers, people with disabilities may participate as active members of society and enjoy their full rights. The Convention does not restrict coverage to specific individuals but rather identifies those with long-term disabilities as beneficiaries. The use of "includes" ensures that the Convention's application is not limited to particular individuals and that parties can provide protection to others, such as those with short-term disabilities or those perceived to be part of such groups.

According to the WHO (2020), in 2018, about 29 million of the 195 million people who comprise Nigeria's national population were living with a disability. Data from the 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey reveal that an estimated 7 percent of household members above the age of five (as well as 9 percent of those 60 or older) have some level of difficulty in at least one functional domain, seeing, hearing, communication, cognition, walking, or self-care; and 1 percent either have a lot of difficulty or cannot function at all in at least one domain. These estimated rates, while significant, are probably even higher because currently available data likely underestimate the prevalence. This rapid social assessment was undertaken to document the current socioeconomic status of persons with disabilities in Nigeria. Findings indicate that persons with disabilities lack access to basic services and that attitudinal barriers represent a major impediment to their socioeconomic inclusion. Inclusive policies are either nonexistent, weak, or inadequately implemented. There is an urgent need to improve the current socioeconomic situation of persons with disabilities in Nigeria.

## **The concept of Inclusive Education**

It is crucial to create an environment where everyone is accepted, regardless of their differences. According to Garuba as cited in Abigail and Felix (2019) this can be achieved through education, building awareness, and creating inclusive societies. It is worth noting that education can play a significant role in altering the perspectives of both children with disabilities and those without disabilities. This way, children with disabilities can see themselves as part of society despite their differences, while individuals without disabilities can promote acceptance and reduce discrimination. Inclusive education refers to a teaching approach that involves all students in meaningful, relevant and accessible learning. It recognizes that individual differences among students can enhance diversity and enrich the learning experience for all (Hockings, 2010). Inclusive education refers to a teaching approach that involves all students in meaningful, relevant and accessible learning.

According to Dreyer (2017), "inclusive education" has become a popular approach to education. It aims to ensure that every student feels included in the educational system, regardless of their background. The author believes that the two biggest challenges facing education today are providing excellent teaching and equal opportunities for all. In an inclusive school, the main principle is that all children should learn together as much as possible, regardless of their unique challenges or differences. To achieve this, inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students. This includes accommodating different learning styles and rates, providing quality education through appropriate curricula and teaching strategies, making effective use of resources, and forging partnerships with the community. To address the range of special needs found in every school, a continuum of support and services must be offered. This includes catering to different learning styles and rates, ensuring quality education for all through appropriate curricula and organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use, and partnerships with their communities. There should be a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school. Dreyer explained that inclusive education originated from the disability movement, with the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education being a significant milestone. This statement, adopted at an international conference in Salamanca, Spain, in 1994, aimed to acknowledge and uphold the human rights of individuals with disabilities. Inclusive education is a method of integrating learners with special educational needs into mainstream education by catering to their individual needs. As a result, more prosperous countries mainly focus on supplying this provision. Inclusive education has made a significant impact on policy, research, and practice on an international level. However, there have been various interpretations, definitions, and responses to the debates surrounding inclusive education across the world. As pointed out by Mitchell, inclusive education has evolved in historical contexts where old beliefs coexist with new ones (2005:13). Nevertheless, inclusive education is more than just accepting learners with disabilities into mainstream schools. It is recognized that other barriers like age, gender, ethnicity, language, class, or HIV status may affect learners' access to education. This broader understanding of inclusive education has a profound effect on transforming entire educational systems.

According to Angelkoska (2015), inclusion means showing mutual respect for the differences and needs of every student, with a focus on the student. They also outlined the

advantages of inclusive education for students with special educational needs, which include warm and caring friendships, increased social connections and networks, greater access to the general curriculum, increased inclusion in future environments, improvements in self-concept, development of personal principles, and greater opportunities for interactions.

According to Wikipedia's 2023 definition, inclusion in education is the idea that all students should have equal access to education and learning opportunities. Originally developed for special education students with individualized education plans or 504 plans, the inclusion model posits that students with special needs are more successful in social interactions and ultimately in life when they have mixed experiences. Inclusion does not prioritize special classrooms or schools for students with disabilities, but rather seeks to move away from seclusion models of special education. The hope is that this will benefit all students, as more able students can model behavior for those who need it, and those who struggle can motivate others to develop empathy.

### **Empowering Children with Disabilities Through Accessible Education**

Creating an inclusive classroom that caters to people with diverse characteristics and treats them fairly requires making education more accessible. In this pursuit, two important concepts stand out: equality and equity. Although they are sometimes used interchangeably, they actually have different meanings. Understanding these differences is crucial if schools want to prioritize accessible education. Equality means that everyone is equal to one another. In education, this usually refers to equal access to resources and opportunities, with all students receiving the same treatment from their teachers. However, equality has its limitations as a concept. Equity, on the other hand, acknowledges the existence of unequal social systems and aims to address them. Its primary focus is not on treating people equally, but rather treating them justly. Achieving equity requires recognizing and addressing the disparities that exist in our society.

Child Right Connect (2020) noted that the process of respecting and fulfilling human rights is both accomplished through and results in empowerment. It added that children with disabilities are first and foremost children with their own rights. Their empowerment is based on achieving those rights, which include being heard and involved in decisions that affect them. And that inclusion means more than just being involved; it requires a social change where children with disabilities are integrated into all aspects of society.

According to UNICEF (2017) interpretation of Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on inclusive education, every child has the right to education. This article outlines the necessary steps to ensure that children with disabilities can exercise this right. Firstly, there must be no discrimination against them and they should have equal access to education. All barriers, whether legal, physical, communication and language, social, financial, or attitudinal, must be eliminated. Secondly, education should help children with disabilities develop their abilities and potential, participate in society, and learn about human rights, diversity, tolerance, and respect for the environment. Thirdly, children with disabilities must not be excluded from the general education system and any legislation that

limits their access should be removed. Finally, children with disabilities must have access to inclusive, quality and free primary and secondary education in their communities.

Furthermore, according to UNICEF, in order to empower children with disabilities, it is important to ensure that there are enough schools available throughout the country and that these schools are accessible to all children with disabilities. This includes making sure that buildings, transport, playgrounds, hygiene and toilet facilities, communications, curriculum, education materials, teaching methods, and assessment and support services are all accessible. Any new buildings must also be accessible. Education services must meet the requirements, cultures, and languages of all students with disabilities. Too, inclusive education systems require commitment and resources from education ministries and throughout the school, as well as support for teachers and students working and learning in inclusive environments. It also requires a cultural change that respects diversity and promotes participatory learning. Partnerships between parents, teachers, and organizations of people with disabilities are also important, as well as regular monitoring of progress.

Schools should adapt to the needs of students with different learning requirements and provide reasonable accommodations to help overcome discrimination in getting an education. Deciding whether an accommodation is reasonable involves an assessment of whether it is relevant and effective, in relation to how much it will cost. The type of accommodations needed must always be decided with the student and, where appropriate, with their parents or caregivers. Students with disabilities are entitled to general support, including enough trained and supported teaching staff, school counselors, psychologists, and other relevant health and social service professionals, as well as access to scholarships and financial resources. Every student with a disability should also be provided with an individual education plan that sets out the accommodations and support they need. Certain groups of students may require specific services, such as learning Braille or sign language, in order to benefit fully from their education. Learners with communication impairments must be provided with the opportunity to express themselves using alternative or augmentative communication, and learners with social communication difficulties must be supported through adaptations to classroom organization. Learners with intellectual impairments must be provided with easy-read teaching and learning materials within a safe, quiet, and structured learning environment. Lastly, trained teachers are essential in providing inclusive education for all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities.

## **Conclusion**

The focus on promoting equity and equality in education for all children has led to the implementation of inclusive education, which transforms the entire education system. This includes legislation and policy, financing, administration, design, delivery, and monitoring of education, as well as school organization. As a result, access to education has improved. The concept of consumer empowerment has also gained importance in research and program development. This paper explores the unique needs and rights of children with disabilities in relation to inclusive education. Inclusive education is a powerful approach that ensures every student has access to and feels included in the educational system, regardless of their background. This empowers children with disabilities.

## Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- 2 Pre-service and in-service training systems should be reviewed and revised to ensure inclusive education principles are fully mainstreamed throughout the teacher education curriculum.
- 3 It is crucial that general pre-service training includes the value of inclusion for all students, without any exceptions. This should not be treated as an optional specialist course solely for teachers who may need to teach certain groups, but rather as a fundamental aspect of teaching..
- 4 teacher training systems should aim to provide a better balance between theory-based learning and hands-on practice. The focus should be on helping teachers become child-centred and inclusive in their approach.
- 5 Teachers should be supported by teaching assistants, head teachers and district or thematic education coordinators to help fulfil their mission toward inclusive teaching.
- 6 Governments need to meaningfully engage teachers and their representative organizations, as well as parents and community organizations, especially those

## References

- Abigail, O. Kusimo & Felix, C. Chidozie | (2019) Inclusive education and sustainable development goals: A study of the physically challenged in Nigeria, *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 6:1, 1684175, DOI: 10.1080/23311983.2019.1684175
- Angelkoska, S. (2015). Education of Students with Special Educational Needs and Their Inclusion in the Community. Bulgarian Comparative Education Society
- Biermann, F.; Kanie, N., and Kim, R. E (2017). Global governance by goal-setting: the novel approach of the UN Sustainable Development Goals". *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*. Open issue, part II.26–27:26–31doi:10.1016/j.cosust.2017.01.010. ISSN 1877-3435
- Child Rights Connect (2020). The rights of child human rights defenders: Implementation Guide. <https://www.childrightsconnect.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/final-implementation-guide-the-rights-of-child-human-rights-defenders-forweb>
- Dreyer, L. (2017). Inclusive Education. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316352226\\_Inclusive\\_Education/citation/download](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316352226_Inclusive_Education/citation/download)
- UNICEF (2017). Understanding Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Switzerland.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008): Issues in the U.S. Ratification Debate".

United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2007): Interparliamentary union, from exclusion to equality: realizing the rights of persons with disabilities <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/training14en.pdf>

United Nations (2018). Secretary-General's Message on International Day of Persons with Disabilities. [www.bing.com/search?q=United+Nations+Secretary+General+message+on+the+International+Day+of+Persons+with+Disabilities&toWww=1&redig=86B0575516454A82A1B240E110C36124](http://www.bing.com/search?q=United+Nations+Secretary+General+message+on+the+International+Day+of+Persons+with+Disabilities&toWww=1&redig=86B0575516454A82A1B240E110C36124)

Wikipedia (2023). Inclusion. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inclusion\\_\(education\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inclusion_(education))

World Bank (2020). Disability Inclusion in Nigeria: A Rapid Assessment: Washington, DC. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/34073> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO.

World Health Organisation (2023). Disability. [https://www.who.int/health-topics/disability#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/disability#tab=tab_1)