Outside the Circle: Assessing the rights of children with disabilities to education and protection in West Africa

Summary of research dissemination event, December 3rd 2013, Dublin

To mark International Day of Persons with Disabilities, the research report Outside the Circle regarding access to education and protection services for children with disabilities in West Africa, was presented on December 3rd 2013 in the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin. The event was organised by Plan Ireland in conjunction with the Dóchas Disability and International Development Working Group in order to:

- Raise awareness of the situation experienced by children with disabilities in West Africa
- Facilitate discussion regarding how to ensure people with disabilities are included in development programmes
- Identify ways to support Irish Aid’s commitment to people with disabilities as outlined in their One World, One Future policy.

The purpose of the research was to gain in-depth knowledge into the stigma, negative attitudes, discrimination and violence that girls and boys with disabilities are subjected to, and to analyze different approaches that have been used in the past to protect children with disabilities, with a view to developing Regional Guidelines to effectively and appropriately help children with disabilities access formal or informal quality education and to be protected from violence and discriminative treatment. It was a qualitative study, including a literature review on the 12 countries we operate in and 4 in-depth country studies in Sierra Leone, Guinea, Togo and Niger.

This research is aligned with Plan’s global strategy One Goal, One Plan which commits Plan to “maximize our reach and impact on children’s lives, particularly those from excluded or marginalized groups”. One of the key principles of the strategy is inclusion and non-discrimination, which is also one of the core principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Plan views this research study as a way to help better understand how to translate this commitment into effective and appropriate action at community level in the countries of operation and to strengthen the technical and human capacity of key stakeholders at regional and country levels.

Main research findings

This research has shown that community perceptions and customary laws are the root causes of endemic violence and discrimination against girls with disabilities. In rural and to some extent urban communities, having a disability is widely perceived as being:

- A punishment or curse from God
- An act of the devil, evil spirits or witchcraft

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- A result of an undesirable act by a parent or close relative
- Reincarnation of a family member
- The result of behavior accepted in many other societies such as: a mother laying on her stomach while pregnant, eating catfish while pregnant, or having looked at a disabled child while pregnant.

People also believe that certain types of disability are contagious. For example, some people believe that epilepsy can be contracted through body contact and via saliva.

Discriminatory attitudes and behaviours towards children with disabilities are often related to the type and/or severity of the disability. For example, children with visual impairments and mental disabilities are extremely discriminated against, while children with physical disabilities suffer from less discrimination.

The research has shown that discrimination and violence against girls (and boys) with disabilities happens mostly in homes, and includes:

- Psychological abuse
- Physical abuse and sexual violence
- Verbal abuse
- Bullying by family members, neighbours and peers
- Exclusion and Neglect: girls and boys with disabilities are denied equal rights and basic needs such as food, clothing, love and affection.

Many children with disabilities do not attend primary school, not to mention post primary, because families are ashamed or believe the child has no ability to learn. In certain regions of northern Guinea for example, a staggering 92% of girls with disabilities are denied their basic right to education.

- The difference between boys and girls
 Both are highly exposed to different forms of violence. But the risk and stigma for girls is greater - a girl with a disability is most often considered a burden on the family and a non-productive member of society. Their ‘value’ often depends on their capacity to find a husband.

Girls with disabilities are more likely to be exposed to sexual violence. Women and girls with disabilities are particularly targeted by perpetrators of violence because of social exclusion, limited mobility, a lack of support structures, communication barriers and negative social perceptions. In many cases, perpetrators of violence are family members or caregivers, and girls with disabilities often find themselves trapped because they are financially and socially dependent on them for survival.

- Conclusions and recommendations
 While there have been dominant traditional views for a long time in communities in West Africa, the research found that the perceptions of children with disabilities are gradually evolving to one that reflects a more biomedical view, where it is believed that disabilities are the result of illnesses, hereditary factors, accidents, poor prenatal care, and complications at birth. So fortunately the attitudes and treatment of children with disabilities are gradually improving, allowing children with disabilities to engage more actively in social and educational activities.

Significant differences between the four countries were apparent in terms of progress being made in the area of disability. Togo has made the most progress, with high government engagement and large scale community based rehabilitation programmes. Sierra Leone and Niger have also progressed, though not as much as Togo. In Sierra Leone, the active network of Disability Persons Organisations has contributed to mobilisation in favour of
disability inclusion and bodes well for the future. In Niger, the development of an inclusive education strategy has been an important milestone in translating government commitment into action. In Guinea unfortunately few indicators of progress have been found.

The key recommendations from the research are as follows:

✓ Conduct awareness campaigns at all levels, particularly with families, communities and in schools, in order to eliminate negative behaviours and discrimination against children with disabilities.
✓ Produce and disseminate existing human rights and legislative frameworks in child-friendly and disability-friendly formats.
✓ Support local organizations to establish efficient, integrated community protection systems for fighting discrimination and abuse of girls and boys with disabilities.
✓ Advocate at the national level for implementation of existing laws and policies in order to develop appropriate actions to protect the rights of girls and boys with disabilities.

Irish Aid’s One World, One Future commitment

The publication of One World, One Future – Ireland’s Policy for International Development by Irish Aid / Department of Foreign Affairs in May 2013 marked a significant advancement for people with disabilities living in the global south. The policy makes it clear that Ireland considers that the realisation of the rights and potential of people with disabilities is essential if we are to achieve a sustainable and just world. One World, One Future commits Ireland to:

✓ Ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) as soon as domestic legal issues have been resolved
✓ Devoting more of its resources to disability, by (i) integrating disability issues into its ongoing work across the entire Irish Aid programme, in line with the UNCRPD, and (ii) by supporting disability-specific initiatives
✓ Redoubling its efforts to ensure the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace and in economic activity in developing countries.

The UNCRPD is the main instrument guiding global disability inclusion in the 21st century. Governments which ratify the UNCRPD commit to promote and protect the rights and dignity of people with disabilities in every sphere of life, including in the field of international development. Article 32 of the Convention provides a normative framework for mainstreaming disability in the development agenda, while Article 11 relates to the safety and protection of people with disabilities in humanitarian emergencies of various kinds.

Disability inclusion is a significant factor for the successful achievement of Ireland’s goals in the six priority areas detailed in One World, One Future, which are;

I. Global hunger  
II. Fragile states  
III. Essential services  
IV. Human rights accountability  
V. Trade and economic growth  
VI. Climate change and development.

To ensure that the policy commitments of One World, One Future are met, Irish Aid will consider conducting further research and establishing a Taskforce to ensure that suitable tools, systems and action plans are developed in line with these commitments.
Moving forward

Plan Ireland is committed to ensuring that children with disabilities are empowered to access their rights through our overseas development programming. Plan is also committed to working with our partners to ensure that their programmes reflect the needs of people with disabilities and that their staff are equipped with the knowledge and tools to manage the transition towards greater inclusion.

Plan Ireland commits to;

- Pilot inclusive education and child protection programmes in West Africa to integrate children with disabilities into mainstream schools and protection services. Learning from this piloting will be shared across countries in West Africa, within the Plan fraternity and with key partners.
- Work closely with the Dóchas Disability and International Development Working Group to share good practice and lessons learnt with other NGOs, academia and Irish Aid.
- Support Irish Aid to identify opportunities for partnership and develop tools and guidance that help operationalise their commitment to people with disabilities as outlined in the *One World, One Future* policy.
- Contract a full-time Disability Programming Specialist in 2014 to ensure consistent support for overseas programming and exchange of good practice and lessons learnt.

Further information

Should you wish to receive a hard copy of the report or would like to contribute to the wider discussion surrounding disability inclusion in the Irish development sector, please contact;

Paddy Austin,
Head of Programmes
Plan Ireland
126 Lower Baggot Street
Dublin 2.
Tel: 00353-1-6599601
Mail: paddy.austin@plan-international.org
Web: www.plan.ie

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