

Paper for conference on Disability Inclusive MDGs and Aid Effectiveness

Theme: The importance of quality education for all

Title: Inclusive Early Childhood Care and Development for Children with Disabilities

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Abstract

The MDGs do not specifically mention disability, but they cannot be achieved without the inclusion of people with disabilities. This paper will argue that inclusive Early Childhood Care and Development is essential to achieve MDG 2 (Universal Primary Education). Over 90% of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend schoolⁱ. As a critical precursor to primary school education, disability inclusion in Early Childhood Care and Development programs is important to ensure that **all** children are enabled to participate, learn and contribute according to their evolving capacities and to reach their fullest potential. Through catering to the needs of the most marginalised and excluded children, creative, flexible and inclusive learning environments are created that will benefit all children. This paper will present a disability inclusive approach with a focus on the Early Childhood Care and Development sector. It will explore the challenges for a mainstream INGO and the synergies with other cross cutting issues, such as child protection and gender. Finally, the paper will share how Plan International Australia is working to improve the quality and effectiveness of development programs through practicing a disability inclusive approach with innovative partnerships and capacity building processes.

Paper

Introduction

The MDGs do not specifically mention disability, but they cannot be achieved without the inclusion of people with disabilities. This paper will argue that inclusive Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) is essential for achieving MDG 2 - Universal Primary Education and this MDG will not be reached without addressing the inclusion of children with disabilities.

A good start for children in the crucial early years (0-8) is fundamental to closing the gaps in equity and a critical precursor for successful transition to primary school, particularly for vulnerable children who are likely to be excluded from education. The impact of ECCD programs is going to be greatest for those children who are most marginalised. While research is limited, including children with disabilities in ECCD programs and activities will increase the likelihood of their continued education and improve their learning outcomes.

Rationale for Inclusive ECCD

According to the World Report on Disability, Children with disabilities are much less likely to attend school than children without disabilities.ⁱⁱ There is broad consensus that at least one third of the world's 72 million children who are not in school have a disability.ⁱⁱⁱ As an essential precursor to primary school education, disability inclusion in Early Childhood Care and Development programs is important to ensure that **all** children are enabled to participate, learn and contribute according to their evolving capacities and to reach their fullest potential. The rights of children with disabilities to equal opportunities and participation in such programs are highlighted in both the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 23)^{iv} and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 24).^v The importance of ECCD for education outcomes is also recognised in Goal 1 of the Education for All Goals.

ECCD programs promote equal participation at a very influential time in life. If children enter school already disadvantaged, through gender, poverty, location or disability, the gap becomes increasingly difficult to close. Combating inequality from the beginning, through working with parents, communities and schools, is essential for ensuring that children with disabilities get the best possible start in life.

Children with disabilities are often excluded from vital early childhood activities that facilitate their transition into school. A wide range of barriers prevent children with disabilities from getting an education, including poor teacher training, inaccessible school buildings and policy barriers.^{vi} Children with disabilities may be hidden away by their families due to the stigma and discrimination they experience in the community. Attitudes of the family, teachers and other children also contribute to children with disabilities being excluded from early childhood programs and then later education^{vii}.

School enrolment rates vary according to type of impairment. Children with intellectual or sensory impairments are less likely to attend school than children with mobility impairments. People with disabilities are also less likely to complete higher levels of education, which affects their socioeconomic opportunities in adulthood^{viii}. This contributes to an ongoing cycle of poverty for the individual, their families and communities.^{ix}

Through catering to the needs of the most marginalised and excluded children, creative, flexible and inclusive learning environments are created that will benefit all children. Disability inclusive ECCD programs can also positively contribute to changing attitudes and beliefs in the value and capacity of children with disabilities amongst families, other children, the community and children with disabilities themselves.

Disability Inclusion and the “Four Cornerstones” of ECCD

The “*Four Cornerstones to Secure a Strong Foundation for Young Children*” is a globally accepted, rights based framework for ECCD programming and advocacy from the Consultative Group on Early Childhood. Plan International Australia has applied a disability perspective to the “*Four Cornerstones*” to help promote disability inclusion in ECCD programming for all children aged 0-8, their families and communities. Using the conceptual framework of the “*Four Cornerstones*,” activities and actions can be identified that support children with disabilities and those around them.

1. Start at the Beginning

Research shows that holistic care and stimulation before birth and throughout the early years builds strong foundations for children’s growth and development. This is particularly so in the case of children with disabilities. Indeed, this is the time of life when risk of future disability can be minimized.

- Promote access to maternal health services in pregnancy and delivery to reduce the risk of disability due to complications in childbirth^x.
- Work with parents to improve knowledge and skills on feeding practices, nutrition, vaccinations and early stimulation for child development, minimizing risk of future disability.
- Build partnerships and referral processes with health clinics and disability service providers so that children with developmental delays and disabilities are identified early and receive appropriate support and assistance.
- Facilitate self-help groups for parents of children with disabilities or encourage them to join existing groups or associations, such as Disabled People’s Organisations.
- Use parenting groups as an entry point for discussion and experience sharing around disability and inclusion. Parenting groups can also be forums for promoting the rights of children with

disabilities, a space for organising play groups for children with disabilities and a place to seek training and information related to disability.

2. Get ready for success

Opportunities for early learning and discovery are also important for children with disabilities.

UNESCO's Education For All Global Monitoring Report states that the educational opportunities of children are shaped by the linguistic, cognitive and social skills they develop in early childhood^{xi}.

- Include children with disabilities in age appropriate peer groups and activities in the community, including playgroups and ECCD centres.
- Empower families and carers to support learning in the home. Where possible design play activities around daily living skills to promote interactions for learning and stimulation.
- Provide training for preschool teachers on inclusion of children with disabilities through improving teaching methodologies and use of materials.
- Training should also equip teachers with the ability to role model inclusion to other children and parents in the way they communicate and interact with any child with a disability.
- Ensure ECCD centres are safe, physically accessible and welcoming.
- Ensure sufficient number of teachers, caregivers or parent volunteers to supervise all children and ensure any additional learning needs can be accommodated.

3. Make Schools Ready for Children

A smooth transition to primary school, especially for children with disabilities, is a critical process for children's development and has long lasting effects on their later academic and life success.

- Raise awareness and advocate with teachers and communities to create a learning environment which "welcomes, nurtures, and educates all children regardless of their gender, physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other characteristics"^{xii}.
- Promote the rights of children with disabilities to reach their potential whether this is best catered for in a mainstream school or through special programs.
- Make schools safe and welcoming to children with different types of disabilities by improving accessibility, including consideration of physical barriers (ramps, toilets), attitudinal barriers and policy or institutional barriers.
- Provide training and resources to primary school teachers on using communication methods and teaching styles that support and facilitate inclusion.
- Support the development of peer groups and clubs for children, including those with disabilities, to enable involvement in community activities and awareness raising.

4. Include Early Childhood in Policies

It is important to work with all levels of government to ensure that investment in early childhood policies and programs brings immediate and long term benefits to children, their families and communities, including through inclusive approaches to ECCD.

- Map the early childhood care and education systems in the community – Who is involved? Which children are included? Which children are excluded and why?
- Work with Disabled People's Organisations and parent groups to advocate for disability inclusion in Government early childhood and education policies and to allocate sufficient budget to implement these policies.
- Facilitate multi-sectoral collaboration between education, health, disability and civil society sectors in policy development and implementation.
- Collect qualitative and quantitative data in ECCD programs on impacts and outcomes for children with disabilities to help inform effective policy and program responses. This includes collecting sex disaggregated data to enable a deeper analysis of the impact of disability on girls and boys.

Working with people with disabilities and their organisations is a core strategy under a rights based approach. People with disabilities can be identified as role models and Disabled People's Organisations can support teachers, parents and children to be inclusive^{xiii}.

Plan's journey towards inclusive ECCD

Plan International Australia strives to ensure that all of its programs and activities are inclusive of, accessible to, and lead to positive change for people with disabilities, in particular children with disabilities. By addressing disability inclusion in ECCD programming, Plan demonstrates its commitment to the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities including article 32 on international development programs. Through ECCD and other programs, Plan is seeking to demonstrate that children made vulnerable and disadvantaged by disability can reach potential comparable to their peers if they are able to access effective supports for their holistic development. Disability inclusive development practice has been embraced within Plan International Australia despite being a fairly new focus for the organisation. Progress has been made over a relatively short time due to the appointment of a dedicated Disability Advisor to help develop and implement an effective and practical disability strategy, and to develop disability capacity within Plan both in Australia and in country offices in developing countries around the world. Another key factor in Plan International Australia's progress is the formation of a 3 year partnership with the CBM-Nossal Partnership for Disability Inclusive Development. This innovative partnership recognises that external disability partnerships are an effective approach to draw on technical expertise, build capacity internally and share knowledge and learning.

In partnership with CBM-Nossal, Plan has been working towards disability inclusive ECCD through:

- The development of inclusive ECCD resources;
- Integration of disability, gender and child protection into ECCD curriculum for parenting groups, ECCD Centres and transitioning from Preschool to Primary school;
- Awareness raising and capacity building, including capacity building pilots with Plan Laos and Plan Indonesia;
- Supporting country offices to undertake action planning and identification of entry points for disability inclusion within ECCD programs throughout the project management cycle;
- Support for disability inclusive program design and implementation

Some of the challenges for Plan to overcome to be disability inclusive include: the need to build internal and partner awareness and capacity; lack of data in project baselines and situational analysis, as well as reliable statistics from government; and the need for more research on effective approaches to disability in development.

Synergies with CP and gender

Another challenge for Plan International Australia is what is often perceived as the competing priorities of other cross cutting issues, such as gender and child protection. Plan is working towards building an understanding of social inclusion that doesn't see these factors in competition but rather identifies and addresses the cross section of issues that increases vulnerability of children and their families and that facilitates integration between sectors for the benefit of all.

Women and girls with disabilities are more vulnerable as they have the "double disadvantage" of discrimination based on both gender and disability. They are more likely to be marginalized within their communities and at greater risk of abuse. Girls with disabilities face significant barriers to accessing education with UNICEF estimating that only around 1% of girls with disabilities are literate^{xiv}. Inclusive ECCD programs are an important platform for capturing parental support for girls. This is a crucial time for convincing parents of the worth of caring for their daughters and striving for them to do well.

Child protection is important for all children especially children with disabilities as they are particularly vulnerable to abuse, neglect and bullying. ECCD programs can play a central role in the protection of children. This is not just in terms of creating a safer environment for children, where they are free from abuse, but also by facilitating the identification of children at risk and children who have been harmed. Including children with disabilities in ECCD programs helps to keep them safe by increasing their protective circle, addressing attitudinal barriers and harnessing support for their participation according to their individual abilities and needs. ECCD programs are also well placed to help children develop their own self protection skills. Child protection considerations need to ensure that children with disabilities have the appropriate communication avenues and access to reporting mechanisms. ECCD programs should also evaluate and address any anticipated child protection issues.

Plan International inclusive ECCD case study

Plan International Egypt is implementing a Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) program focusing on outreach and inclusion of children with disabilities and their families. Over 5 years, the CBR program has raised awareness of the rights of children with disabilities and built the capacity of 35 Community Development Associations. ECCD is an important component of the program. Plan works in communities to support children with disabilities' early development and stimulation as well as rehabilitation. Plan also mobilises and supports community efforts to include children with disabilities in kindergartens, mainstream schools as well as recreational and social activities. The program has reached 5,500 children with disabilities in 6 governorates in Egypt and more than 500 of these children have now been included in community kindergartens and schools. Plan and partners have also been successful in lobbying for inclusive education; the Ministry of Education issued a ministerial decree in July 2011 sanctioning schools in Egypt to be inclusive of children with disabilities. Plan Egypt and partners have also developed inclusive kindergarten toolkits that document best practices for supporting the inclusion of children with disabilities in Egypt.

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ⁱ CBM (2011), *End the Cycle: Education, disability and poverty*. 2011, http://endthecycle.org.au/documents/resources/CBM-ETC-004_Education-Factsheet_v05_0303201140706935.pdf

ⁱⁱ World Health Organisation and World Bank (2011), *World Report on Disability*. 2011, WHO Press: Geneva.

ⁱⁱⁱ United Nations Secretary General's Report on the Status of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (2011), UN Document A/66/230.

^{iv} United Nations (1989), *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. 1989, United Nations: Geneva.

^v United Nations (2006), *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol*. 2006, United Nations: Geneva

^{vi} World Health Organisation and World Bank (2011) *World Report on Disability*. 2011, WHO Press: Geneva.

^{vii} World Health Organization and World Bank, (2011), *World Report on Disability*. 2011, WHO Press: Geneva.

^{viii} World Health Organization and World Bank, (2011), *World Report on Disability*. 2011, WHO Press: Geneva.

^{ix} Department for International Development (DFID) (2000) *Disability, Poverty and Development*. 2000, DFID: London.

^x World Health Organization, (2005), *World Health Report 2005: Make every mother and child count*. 2005, WHO: Geneva.

^{xi} UNESCO (2011), *EFA Global Monitoring Report–The hidden crisis-Armed conflict and education*. UNESCO: France.

^{xii} UNESCO (2009), *Embracing diversity: toolkit for creating inclusive, learning-friendly environments*. 2009, UNESCO: Bangkok.

^{xiii} World Health Organization, (2010), *CBR Guidelines: Education component*. 2010, WHO: Geneva.

^{xiv} UNICEF (1999), *An Overview of Young People Living with Disabilities: their Needs and their Rights*. 1999, UNICEF: New York.